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Locating Safe Spaces for Food Insecure Female Community College Students

A Dissertation Presented

by

MICHELLE ERRINGTON NICHOLSON

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2020

College of Education

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Locating Safe Spaces for Food Insecure Female Community College Students

A Dissertation Presented

by

MICHELLE ERRINGTON NICHOLSON

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My family has truly served as a source of inspiration and gave me the stubbornness to get me through this process. Thank you to my Mom and Dad (Sue and Tim Errington), my sister Becki, my extended Nicholson family and of course my husband, Scott Nicholson, who took the brunt of my stress like a champ (most days!).

Finally, I want to acknowledge the incredible students who participated in and inspired this project. College student food insecurity is a nation-wide issue. I have witnessed students struggle to meet their basic needs yet continue to pursue a college degree in the face of almost insurmountable odds. The way our students persevere humbles me each and every day. They are the real success stories and I am grateful and honored to present their challenges and successes to ensure community colleges have the

resources for students to succeed and thrive. Thank you for continuing to share your stories, they are inspirational.

## **ABSTRACT**

### **LOCATING SAFE SPACES FOR FOOD INSECURE FEMALE COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS**

MAY 2020

MICHELLE ERRINGTON NICHOLSON, B.A. ROGER WILLIAMS UNIVERSITY

M.S. UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND

Ph.D, UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Professor Kathryn McDermott

Food insecurity is a problem on many college campuses and as such is an increasing focus of research (Ferguson, 2004; et al., 2014; Meldrum & Willows, 2006; Patton-López, et al., 2014; Powers, 2012; Rondeau, 2007). These studies and others (Chaparro, et al., 2009; Freudenberg, et al, 2011; Hughes, et al., 2011; Lindsley & King, 2014) report that from 21-69% of college students experience food insecurity. I examined college student food insecurity at a small rural community college in Massachusetts in an attempt to discover safe spaces for female students to disclose food insecurity and the characteristics of those safe spaces. Additionally, I explored various aspects of identity, including gender, that impact student's willingness and ability to seek resources for food insecurity. Eight students participated in two rounds of interviews and provided photographic data of spaces they identified as safe on campus.

I discovered that gender and other identities such as race and LGBT status do not play a large role in comfort seeking resources; however, gender does shape how students define safe spaces. Safe spaces were characterized in abstract terms for all participants (safe people being the biggest theme) but for females, safety was also concrete and included physical characteristics such as lighting and proximity to campus police.



Finally, although participants did not hold spaces to be identity based, nor did they identify with an identity of being food insecure or low-income, they did feel most comfortable in safe spaces that were resource based such as veteran service, disability services and the college counselor.

Key Words: Food Insecurity, Community College, Identity, Female, Safe, Space, Resource.

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# **CHAPTER 1**

## **INTRODUCTION**

In the United States, in 2018, 11.1% or 37.2 million people lived in households that were food insecure (United States Department of Agriculture, 2018). Households near or below the federal poverty line experiencing food insecurity at the highest levels are headed by single parents, women living alone or people of color (Coleman-Jensen, et al., 2014). Single women living with children experience the highest rate of food insecurity in the nation at 27.8% (USDA, 2018) and women, especially women with children, are disproportionately impacted by food insecurity. College students experience food insecurity at higher rates than the general public (Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Henry, 2017; Kolowich, 2015). Further, community college students, given their own characteristics and those of their families, are deemed more likely to be at risk for food insecurity (Blagg, et al., 2017). Finally, Feeding America, a national network of food banks indicates one in ten of its 45.5 million clients are college students (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). That is roughly 4.5 million college students utilizing food banks across the nation.

Food insecurity in the United States is defined as the “limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways “(Anderson, 1990, 1560). Socially unacceptable ways to access food include using a food pantry, asking others for food or meals (Wolfe, Frongillo, & Valois, 2003), and “dumpster diving” (pg. 187, Eikenberry, & Smith, 2005). Another definition frames food insecurity as “an inadequate amount of food intake due to a lack of resources” (Alaimo, et al., 2001, 782). Food insecurity is also called food oppression, defined as “institutional, systemic, food-related action or policy

that physically debilitates a socially subordinated group” (pg. 1253, Allen, 1999). Finally, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines food security as “access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life.” (USDA, 2018)

Food insecurity is a problem on many college campuses and as such is becoming an increasing focus of research on four-year residential campuses (Ferguson, 2004; et al., 2014; Meldrum & Willows, 2006; Patton-López, et al., 2014; Powers, 2012; Rondeau, 2007). These studies and others (Chaparro, et al., 2009; Freudenberg, et al, 2011; Hughes, et al., 2011; Lindsley & King, 2014) report that from 21-69% of college students experience food insecurity. It should be noted there is a possibility of under-reporting due to stigma associated with hunger and poverty (Buch, et al., 2016; Kolowich, 2015; Plantz, 2014; Resnikoff, 2014).

Students do not need to be hungry all the time to be food insecure, but students needing to make trade-offs between paying for gas, heat, books or groceries are certainly food insecure (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). With nearly half of all Pell Grant recipients at public colleges and universities coming from families living below the poverty line, many students come to college in the hopes of becoming more food secure but are met with continued food insecurity (Goldrick-Rab, 2016).

Research into food insecurity in community college students is important due to its limited attention in the current literature. The absence of the community college context in the investigation of student food insecurity is especially problematic in part because according to the National Center for Education Statistics (Radford, et al., 2015), 51% of community college students are in the lowest income group; therefore, community colleges are particularly vulnerable to having a food insecure student



population (Nord, et al., 2011). Food insecurity can easily disrupt a nontraditional educational path such as often found at community colleges.

Colleges are without safety net programs like the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). The United States began offering free or affordable lunch options to K-12 students in the early 1900s as a response to the growing concern of malnourished children who repeatedly missed school, or were inattentive and apathetic (Ruis, 2017). Today, 30.4 million children are enrolled in the NSLP (USDA, 2018). Free lunches are provided to students at or below 130% of the national poverty level and reduced lunches for students between 130% and 185% of the national poverty level.

For students living on residential campuses, financial aid covers costs of campus meal plans, but financial aid is failing to meet basic needs on non-residential campuses. The need for financial aid reform and the rising cost of college are two major concerns affecting student ability to meet basic needs. For years, the cost of education has been rapidly increasing and financial aid has not kept pace with the cost resulting in many students not being able to afford the basics such as books, childcare and living expenses including food. Financial aid was designed to help those who earned less than \$16,000 per year, yet is failing the lowest income group, and failing the middle-class (Goldrick-Rab, 2016): “In 1990, only the poorest quarter of American families had to pay much more than 20% of their annual income for higher education. Today, 75% of families pay at least that much” (p. 5). For those making less than \$16,000 the net price of college amounts to 84% of their income after all grants have been distributed (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). The Pell grant, begun in 1973, was intended to keep students from acquiring debt,

but has not kept pace with inflation; therefore, nine out of ten Pell grant recipients now graduate with debt (Goldrick-Rab, 2016).

Between 1996 and 2012, the average cost of community college rose 52% (Goldrick-Rab 2016). The rising cost of college has made it impossible for financial aid to meet student need. While other countries have addressed this concern by providing grants for costs of living, the United States has not. The United States has run a program covering student living expenses through the GI Bill since the 1940s so this model has a proven record of success. At public community colleges, students are met with an average price tag of \$8,000 per year and rely heavily on loans to meet that debt (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). However, these are only “direct” expenses; “indirect” expenses (according to current financial aid formulas) include books, housing, transportation and food. The use of the term “indirect” is often translated as optional but leaving these needs unmet decreases a student's chance of completing their degree leaving them reliant on social welfare programs in the future (Goldrick-Rab, 2016).

Until all low-income students are eligible for grants covering basic costs of living, their basic needs will continue to be unmet leaving them vulnerable to food insecurity. Currently, studies on financial aid neglect to include questions about housing and food insecurity (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). Barriers to retention and success for food insecure students’ needs to be examined.

### **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to explore how cisgender female students at a small rural community college in Massachusetts navigate food insecurity. Specifically, the problem addressed is how cisgender female community college students find safe spaces

on campus to disclose food insecurity. My choice in focusing on hunger is based on the national dialogue around hunger issues and the increasing prevalence of hunger on college campuses (Hughes, et al., 2011). My choice to focus on community colleges is based on the percentage of low-income students choosing community colleges; low-income defined as an annual family income below \$30,000 (Ma & Baum, 2016). Finally, my choice in focusing on cisgender women is their over-representation at community colleges paired with their economic vulnerability (Coleman-Jensen, et al., 2014; St. Rose & Hill, 2013). Through this research, the potential exists to influence national practices at community colleges as they strive to provide students with safe spaces to disclose food insecurity.

### **Research Questions**

- How do female community college students navigate food insecurity?
  - Are safe and unsafe spaces part of a student's experience of food insecurity? If so, does identity impact feelings of safety in certain spaces?
  - What campus resources do food insecure community college women identify as "safe spaces" in which to navigate the issues associated with their food insecurity?
  - Why do food insecure community college women perceive these spaces as safe?
  - Why do food insecure community college women perceive other spaces as unsafe?

## **Approach to Inquiry**

I conducted a series of semi-structured open-ended interviews with a “data outcropping” of food insecure community college students. Data outcroppings refer to a sample informed by prior experience in the field directing us where we are most likely to find participants engaged in the phenomenon we want to study (Luker, 2008). An email (Appendix A) was sent to a randomly generated list of emails for ½ of the current student population announcing the food pantry and asking if they were interested in participating in the study. Students willing to participate submitted a small demographics survey (see Appendix B) and were entered into a raffle for a gift card to the college bookstore. A sample of 8 students were selected based on diversity of major, age, race, marital and parental status, and ability. Students also learned of the option to participate through the college food pantry and finally, I recruited using a theoretic sampling frame to retain the ability to adjust sampling based on the emergent theoretical model.

The study took place at Massachusetts Community College (a pseudonym). Interviews were conducted in the fall of 2018 and spring of 2019, approximately three months apart. Between interviews, participants photographed safe spaces on campus and texted these photos prior to the second interview where they were asked to construct a narrative around the photos. Both the photographs and the narratives were analyzed with the interview data.

I utilized grounded theory as it produces theory, rather than confirming a pre-existing theory or prescribed set of conditions. Constructivist grounded theory requires the researcher to engage with participants to fully understand and clarify rather than confirm their experience. Qualitative methods are required to approach this study from a

constructivist grounded theory perspective. I utilized sensitizing concepts from the literature to inform my study and revisited the literature after data analysis. Finally, safe spaces and how they operate on college campuses served as my theoretical framework and along with recent research on college student food insecurity, served as my entry point to the data.

### **Clarification of Terms**

Hunger and food insecurity are terms often used interchangeably leading to an oversimplification of the problem. Looking at the issue in simple terms has resulted in a proliferation of food banks, soup kitchens and benefits such as food stamps and “commodity distribution” (pg. 117, Allen, 1999) without a real effort to address systemic issues leading to food insecurity.

Two key terms are utilized in this study, food security and food insecurity. The most encompassing definition of food security comes from the Food and Agriculture Organization, “food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.” (2009, pg. 1) By the standards of this definition, our nation and our college campuses are not food secure.

Food insecurity, defined as “limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways” (Anderson, 1990, p. 1560) is the most commonly used definition in studies of college student food insecurity.

## **Limitations**

This study is situated at the intersection of gender and social class and examines the intersection of these two concepts that are fluid, “volatile, mutable system(s) whose meanings could never fully be secured” (Scott, 2008, p. 1423). Although not specifically a limitation, a safe space for one food insecure population (female community college students) may not be generalizable to a four-year educational setting or a different population based on variables such as age, ethnicity, race, etc. However, this study provides a possible framework to be applied in various educational settings and with diverse student populations.

I acknowledge there are a myriad of other ways I could have chosen to explore the phenomenon of food insecurity. I could have chosen a different research site (another community college or 4-year college); I could have focused only on males or only on females. I focused on gender as this is in large part how I see the world, but if I did the study over again I might focus on something else such as race or not focused on identity rather on academics or the impact of food insecurity. I could have utilized quantitative methods as is most common in studying food insecurity; and, I could have chosen a different entry point to the study other than safe spaces (such as patterns of food consumption or interactions with the state).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter highlights the growing problem with college student food insecurity and possible contributing factors such as the rising cost of college and the need for financial aid reform. As indicated, the purpose of this study is to explore how female students at a small rural community college in Massachusetts navigate food insecurity.

Chapter two examines the growing concern over college affordability and its tie to college student food insecurity as well as the growing body of research conducted over the past decade at community colleges, four-year colleges and universities and across college systems. Who is at risk for food insecurity, GPA and academic performance of food insecure students and adaptive behaviors were examined. This is followed by a brief look at initiatives such as Single Stop and CUFBA.

As a conceptual framework, I examine safe spaces on college campuses including their various uses, definitions and controversies. This examination includes safe spaces specific to community colleges and LGBT Safe Zones as one model presenting challenges and successes. Finally, I also examine gender as a category of analysis, the intersection of gender and food insecurity, and the disproportionate ways women are impacted by food insecurity.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Introduction**

Food insecure college students face many challenges including inability to concentrate leading to lower GPA's, the need to seek employment while attending college and growing debt to meet their immediate needs, overcoming stigma associated with seeking services for food insecurity such as frequenting a campus food bank and applying for SNAP benefits, and in many cases breaking a generational cycle of poverty. Students meet these challenges in diverse ways such as incurring personal and academic debt, limiting their food intake, visiting campus events for food, and seeking out resources such as a campus food bank. In order to meet their needs, students must find safe spaces on campuses to disclose their food insecurity and secure resources. Further complicating the concern, studies point to female students being more at risk for food insecurity (McArthur, et al., 2017; Shive & Morris, 2006). Identifying or creating safe spaces for female food insecure community college students to disclose food insecurity and obtain resources is necessary in combating this growing problem.

This literature review begins by exploring studies documenting the problem of food insecurity on college campuses. I then explore themes across the literature including who is at risk for food insecurity, the effects of college student food insecurity, and adaptive behaviors. I briefly examine national initiatives to address student food insecurity. I explore concepts of safe spaces and gender as my theoretical framework. I conclude with insights and dilemmas presented in the literature as well as a summary as



to how the literature informs my exploration of the experience of female community college food insecure students.

### **Documenting the Problem**

Food insecurity in the United States is defined as the “limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways” (Anderson, 1990, p. 1560). Socially unacceptable ways to access food include using a food pantry, asking others for food or meals (Wolfe, Frongillo, & Valois, 2003), and “dumpster diving” (pg. 187, Eikenberry, & Smith, 2005). The term “acceptable” is subjective and an important avenue to explore. Another definition frames food insecurity as “an inadequate amount of food intake due to a lack of resources” (pg. 782, Alaimo, et al., 2001). Food insecurity is also called food oppression, defined as “institutional, systemic, food-related action or policy that physically debilitates a socially subordinated group” (pg. 1253, Allen, 1999). Finally, the USDA defines food security as “access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life.” (USDA, 2018)

Until recently, food insecurity in college students received little attention in the literature (Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Hughes, et al., 2011; Nugent, 2011; Patton-López, et al., 2014) but the research is quickly becoming more prevalent (Calvez, et al., 2016). To date, the study reporting the highest rate of college student food insecurity was conducted at the University of Alaska (Lindsley & King, 2014) utilizing the USDA Household Food Insecurity Survey. The cross-sectional survey of 33 Alaskan college students determined 69% of respondents reported high or very high food insecurity.

The University of Massachusetts - Boston administered a food and housing insecurity survey (Silva, et al., 2017) and found 25% of students reported food insecurity and 5.4% indicated they were housing insecure. This is similar to what Goldrick-Rab (2016) found in the Wisconsin state college system. The University of Oregon reported 59% of students were food insecure while the University of New Hampshire reported 34.8% of students were food insecure.

Most research being conducted on food insecurity in college students focuses on students attending four-year or graduate degree granting institutions. However, many individuals seek out community college to become more food secure and financially stable (De Marco, et al., 2009). The lack of attention in the literature is problematic as community colleges provide access and opportunities for first-generation, low-income, ethnic and racial minority, underprepared, nontraditional aged and other marginalized individuals many of whom are prone to food insecurity (Bragg, et al., 2006; Lamkin, 2004; Provasnik & Planty, 2008; Townsend & Twombly, 2007). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (Radford, et al., 2015), 51% of community college students are in the lowest income group. Townsend and Twombly (2007) are especially vocal about the opportunities community colleges have historically provided for women students, administrators and faculty since their inception. Further, community college students, given their own characteristics and those of their families, are deemed more likely to be at risk for food insecurity (Blagg, et al., 2017).

A survey, conducted by the Wisconsin Hope Lab, of more than 4,000 students at 10 community colleges across seven states (Goldrick-Rab, et al., 2015) demonstrated 50% of all community college students were food insecure with 20% having gone hungry

in the last month. The article details the rising cost of community college and student ignorance around benefits they may qualify for such as Supplemental Nutritional Aid Program (SNAP), more commonly referred to as food stamps. The study found 27% of community college students qualified for SNAP yet were unaware that full-time students were eligible for this benefit. Mai (2014) found only 14% of Wisconsin food insecure students were receiving food stamps. Part of the reason could be the stigma associated with applying for food stamps (Goldrick-Rab, 2016), hence the need for a safe place on campus for students to disclose food insecurity and to seek resources.

The problem of college student food insecurity has been established through quantitative methods, but now we need qualitative studies to aid us in understanding the problem and how it can be addressed. A standard tool to assess food insecurity in the general population is the USDA Household Food Insecurity Survey Module. This survey is the most widely utilized or adapted for use on college campuses in the U.S. and abroad (see Chaparro, et al, 2009; Farahbakhsh, et al., 2016; Gaines, et al., 2014; Gallegos, et al., 2014; Gorman, 2014; Hanna, 2014; Hughes et al., 2011; Kassier & Veldman, 2013; Micevski, et al., 2014; Moroto, et al., 2015; Nur Atiqah, et al., 2015; Patton- López et al., 2014; Van den Berg, et al., 2013)

A 2009 study conducted at the University of Hawaii (Chaparro, et al., 2009) utilized the USDA Household Food Insecurity Survey Module to survey a cross-section of 410 sophomore, junior, senior and graduate students to ascertain if they were food insecure. 45% of students were classified as either at risk for food insecurity, low food secure or very low food secure. 21% of students had altered their food intake and 24% reported anxiety over access to food and financial concerns. Chaparro, et al., (2009)

determined that students living with their parents were at the least risk for food insecurity. A food insecure student is most likely to live alone and off campus rather than with parents or on campus and with roommates. Additionally, a food insecure student most often lived in poverty as a child, is a single parent and is female. Who exactly is at the most risk for food insecurity?

### **Who is at Risk?**

Researchers have examined several factors that may affect students' risk of being food-insecure. The most recent study to be published indicated the top risks for college student food insecurity were living-off campus, receiving a Pell grant, reported parental education of high-school or less, and no access to a meal plan (El Zein, et al., 2019). These are also characteristics of many community college students (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Nord, et al., 2011). Risk factors such as student living arrangements, marital status and parenthood, pre-existing circumstances, financial aid and income, student employment, college affordability and gender are discussed.

### **Student Living Arrangements**

According to recent research, students who live with their parents and students who live on campus are less likely than others to face food insecurity (Chaparro et al., 2009; Micevski, et al., 2014; Davidson, 2015). Students who are financially independent but have low incomes are at more risk of food insecurity (Gaines, et al., 2014; Shive & Morris, 2006; McArthur, et al., 2017).

At the University of Hawaii (Chaparro et al., 2009), students living with their parents were determined to have the most food security and a similar finding was generated from a study conducted across several campuses of the University of Australia

(Hughes et al., 2011) seeking “to identify and describe the prevalence, distribution by socioeconomic and demographic attributes and severity of food insecurity and related behavioral adaptations” (p. 28). Similarly, Micevski, Thornton and Brockington (2014) found Australian students living with family are less likely to be food insecure.

Gaines, et al., (2014) discovered food insecurity at the University of Alabama was directly attributable to being financially independent with no familial aid as well as being eligible for financial aid and government food assistance indicating financial vulnerability. Gaines et al., (2014) specifically advocated for further exploration of how living off-campus without familial aid impacts food insecurity as they suspect a stronger correlation than their research indicated as living arrangements was not specifically addressed in their study.

In California, between 7-10% of students at the two community college campuses needed to access emergency food resources (Shive & Morris, 2006). These food insecure students were predominantly unmarried females, living alone, with an annual household income under \$10,000. This correlates to the national data stating households near or below the federal poverty line experiencing food insecurity at the highest levels were headed by single parents, women living alone or people of color (Coleman-Jensen, et al., 2014).

A similar finding in the Appalachian region of North Carolina confirms these characteristics are true of urban and rural locations. McArthur, et al., (2017) found 95.7% of students reporting food insecurity were single, 61.8% were women, 76.4 % lived off campus and 75.9% had an annual income below \$6,000 per year. Similar to other studies, Davidson (2015) found living on campus is a key predictor of food security at the

University of New Hampshire. These studies demonstrate students living alone are at risk for food insecurity.

### **Marital Status and Parenthood**

Recent research indicates that married students without children are at the least risk for food insecurity, whereas single students living alone and single parents are at a greater risk for food insecurity (Chaparro et al., 2009; Maroto, et al., 2014; McArthur, et al., 2017).

Maroto, Snelling, & Linck (2014), in examining food insecurity at two Maryland Community College campuses found those at the highest risk for food insecurity were individuals living alone or who were single parents; as well as students identifying as African American or multiracial. These findings confirm research indicating students living without family support are at an increased risk for food insecurity (Chaparro et al., 2009). McArthur, et al., (2017) found that 95.7% of students reporting food insecurity were single. Many community college students are classified as independent because they tend to be older (average age of 24), or married with children (Horn, et al., 2006). Ma & Baum (2015) found that 59% of community college students are classified as financially independent. For some, financially independent can also mean financially vulnerable.

### **Pre-existing Circumstances**

Pre-existing circumstances such as childhood poverty are often a cause of continued food insecurity in college (Davidson, 2015, Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Mai, 2014). Hughes et al., (2011) indicated college student food insecurity stems from preexisting circumstances entering college such as low socioeconomic level and predictive demographic attributes. Similarly, Mai (2014) determined that students who experienced

hunger as children report being food insecure at higher rates in college. In examining factors leading to student food insecurity, a survey conducted in 2014 at the University of New Hampshire (Davidson, 2015) found 17.2 % of food insecure students were low or marginally food secure during childhood, less than the 25% found by Goldrick-Rab (2016). The survey, conducted again the following year, found a drastic increase in student food insecurity with 34.8% reporting low or marginal food security in 2015. While the article offered no rationale for the drastic increase, it did cite the growing cost of higher education as a general concern leading to food insecurity correlating to more recent findings by Goldrick-Rab (2016). The lack of financial aid to keep pace with the cost of college attendance is one cause of college student food insecurity (Goldrick-Rab, 2016) especially for students coming from a low-income background.

### **Financial Aid and Income**

A predisposition for food insecurity exists for students who receive financial aid (Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Hughes et al., 2011). The University of Alabama (Gaines et al., 2014) advocated for reform in current financial aid formulas, increased assistance with food management and budget management skills, increasing food assistance income thresholds and regulations to include full time student status, as they found that financial obligations to attain a degree were exacerbating the hunger situation on campus. The University of Alabama was not alone in finding students were experiencing an increase in debt to meet their basic needs as other studies (Hornak, et al., 2010; McGlynn, 2006; Robb & Pinto, 2010) have indicated the same findings with Hornak et al., (2010) and McArthur et al., (2007) specifically citing credit card use to obtain food. Similarly, Nugent (2011) mentioned students accumulating credit card debt to pay for food.

CUNY (City University of New York) surveyed over 1,000 students on their four-year and two-year campuses (Freudenberg, et al., 2011) and found that over 40% were food insecure. In line with the overall student population demographics, 26.4% of student household income was below \$20,000 and another 27.3% between \$20,000 and \$49,999. This is similar to the household income of community college students nationally (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013). Students reporting household incomes below \$20,000 were more than two times as likely to be food insecure as their peers with household incomes over \$50,000 (Freudenberg, et al., 2011).

While the Pell Grant program succeeded in giving 10 million low-income students access to college, it has inadequately addressed non-educational expenses resulting in students living in poverty while obtaining a college degree (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2016). Half of all Pell recipients come from families living below the poverty line; 25% grew up in homes where they did not have enough to eat (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Goldrick-Rab, 2016). In fact, food and housing insecurity are now greater for college students than among the general population (Broton, Frank & Goldrick-Rab, 2014).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (Radford, et al., 2015), 51% of community college students are in the lowest income group. Low-income students tend to enter college less academically prepared than more affluent students, have less resources while in school leading to a higher attrition rate (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008), and are unacquainted with college norms, culture and academic expectations (Tym, et al., 2004). To complicate matters further, more community college students are employed versus those at four-year colleges (Anderson & Nieves, 2020)



## **Student Employment**

Students who are employed are at a greater risk for food insecurity, perhaps due to their low-income status and the need to work (Freudenberg, et al., 2011; Patton-López et al., 2014). At the University of Oregon, Patton-López et al., (2014) examined the prevalence of food insecurity to identify correlates and found more than half (59%) of participants indicated being food insecure in the past year. Patton-López et al., (2014) utilized the USDA Household Food Insecurity Survey Module and found the correlates for food insecurity were an annual income below \$15,000, having poor health, and, interestingly, being employed. There was no differentiation between part-time and full-time employment, but Freudenberg et al., (2011) also found that employed students are more apt to be food insecure specifically those working more than twenty hours per week. Although (Freudenberg et al., 2011) did not inquire about family income, they did determine that students supporting themselves were 1.6 times more likely to be food insecure than students without jobs who were financially dependent on their families and tended to come from higher income households.

Glik and Martinez (2017) found that food insecurity is beginning to be a somewhat normalized experience on their campus as many students are struggling to meet their most basic needs. Students indicated working multiple part-time jobs to make ends meet. However, Mukigi, et al., 2018 found that increased work-time for food insecure students negatively affected classwork as there was less time to study. Finally, Freudenberg et al. (2011) found that having a full or part-time job in addition to being a student was both a risk factor and an adaptive behavior to food insecurity.

## **College Affordability**

College affordability is at the forefront of any discussion on college student food insecurity and is gaining attention in the literature. For families making less than \$16,000, the net price of college amounts to 84% of their income after all grants have been distributed (Goldrick-Rab, 2016) so it is no surprise the lowest income population experiences food insecurity. In 2006, Perna and Li, examined the increasing 25-year trend of lack of college affordability and found that affordability was declining, especially for low-income and lower-middle-income families and advocated for policymakers to consider ways to improve affordability, particularly by targeting financial aid resources toward students from low- and lower middle-income backgrounds. Perna and Li, (2006) cited several factors contributing to this phenomenon, including the rising cost of health care, growing income inequality, a decline in employer-provided educational benefits, increasing overall household debt, declining personal savings and the price increase of college tuition and fees coinciding with a decrease in Pell Grant purchasing power. In the past 14 years, things have only gotten worse.

The Hope Lab has been researching community college affordability and college student hunger and homelessness for the past five years. They found the price of college has gone up dramatically over time, specifically since the Great Recession, and the rising cost of college makes it impossible for financial aid to meet student need (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Glik & Martinez, 2017). Between 1996 and 2012, the average cost of community college rose 52% (Goldrick-Rab, 2016) and families earning over \$20,000 per year are required to pay at least \$8,000 for one year of community college (Goldrick-Rab & Kendall, 2014).

## **Veterans and Their Families**

The Real College Survey, conducted by The Hope Lab, was completed by nearly 86,000 college students nationwide in 2018. Among other data, this survey indicated no difference in self-reporting of food insecurity between veteran and non-veteran students (Goldrick-Rab, et al., 2019). Whereas 47% reported being food insecure, 48% reported being food secure and only 3% of those indicating food insecurity were recipients of veteran benefits (Goldrick-Rab, et al., 2019). Other studies have indicated a high prevalence of food insecurity and increased vulnerability for veteran students (Cady, 2016; Phillips, et al., 2018).

## **Disability**

In the general population, people with disabilities have a higher poverty rate and lower employment rate compared to those without disabilities (Huang, et al., 2010; Weathers, 2005) as well as lower general access to healthy food options (Rogers & Hogan, 2005). The USDA determined that 40% of households with very low food security included an adult with a disability (Coleman-Jensen & Nord, 2013). This is important to acknowledge as over 50% of students with documented disabilities attend community colleges (Raue & Lewis, 2011).

The United States Government Accountability Office published that data indicating students with disabilities have a higher propensity for food insecurity, and that disability is a particular stressor that may overlap with being low-income or may be a direct cause of being low-income. Being disabled is one of the exceptions to the SNAP restriction on benefits for full-time college students (Larin, 2018). Finally, the Real College Survey measuring hunger and homelessness found among community college

students, 58% of food insecure students were disabled (Goldrick-Rab, et al., 2019).

Interestingly, only 4% of those responding reported being recipients of SSDI disability income (Goldrick-Rab, et al., 2019).

## **Gender**

Women are at higher risk for food insecurity (McArthur, et al., 2017; Shive & Morris, 2006). Whereas men still outpace women of the same educational level in terms of salary, women get a larger payoff in their wages by earning a college degree at a boost of 50% of their previous earnings (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). A college education is a direct route to financial security for women, although many studies indicate that women are at the most risk for being food insecure college students. Single women living with children experience the highest rate of food insecurity in the nation (McArthur, et al., 2017; Shive & Morris, 2006). The USDA (2018) indicated that women, especially women with children, are disproportionately impacted by food insecurity. This is concerning, as college students are experiencing food insecurity at higher rates than the public (Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Kolowich, 2015).

A study conducted in the Appalachian region of North Carolina (McArthur, et al., 2017) found 66% of students indicating food insecurity identified as female and Shive and Morris (2006) found California food insecure students were predominantly unmarried females; living without roommates, family or children; and with an annual household income under \$10,000. This correlates to the national data stating households near or below the federal poverty line experiencing food insecurity at the highest levels were headed by women living alone (Coleman-Jensen, et al., 2014).

According to the research outlined above, risk factors for college student food insecurity include students living alone with no familial support; pre-existing circumstances such as poverty or childhood food insecurity; a lack of sufficient financial aid and living below the poverty line; being single; having children, especially as a single woman; having a part-time job; growing lack of college affordability; and gender as women were deemed more at risk for food insecurity.

### **Effects of Food Insecurity**

Many studies of college student food insecurity tend to attribute the same concerns that adolescents have to the post-secondary population (Hughes et al., 2011). Research on the impact of food insecurity on adolescents indicates negative consequences such as tardiness and absenteeism, attention deficits, low grades in math and reading, suspension, psychological dysfunction and grade repetition (Jyoti, et al., 2005; Kleinman, et al., 1998; Murphy, et al., 1998; Winicki & Jemison, 2003). Similarly, difficulty attending class has been attributed to food insecurity in college students (Roustit, et al., 2010; Seligman, et al., 2010). Below, I discuss the effects of food insecurity on college student academic performance.

### **Adverse Academic Outcomes**

Many researchers report adverse academic outcomes such as lower GPA and poor attendance for food insecure students (Henry, 2017; Hughes et al., 2011; Maroto, et al., 2014; Martinez, et al., 2018; McArthur et al, 2017; Morris, et al., 2016; Mukigi, et al, 2018; Nugent, 2011; Patton-López et al., 2014; Silva et al., 2017). Nugent (2011) found that Canadian students utilizing a campus food bank reported adverse academic outcomes indicating inability to concentrate or study for an exam and inability to complete

assignments or attend class. Patton-López et al., (2014) in Oregon and McArthur et al., (2017) in the Appalachian region of North Carolina, found that food insecure students have lower GPAs, reinforcing assumptions made by Hughes et al., (2011) that research indicating poor academic performance in food insecure secondary school students is consistent with research on the academic performance of food insecure college students. Similarly, findings of Morris et al., (2016) across the University of Illinois state system, correlated food insecurity with low GPA.

A study of community college students in Maryland sought to determine a correlation between student food insecurity and lower GPAs, energy levels, and ability to concentrate (Maroto, et al., 2014). Two campuses in the Maryland Community College system were surveyed, one urban and one suburban, with 301 participants. The urban campus experienced a slightly higher rate of food insecurity. The study found that 56% of students were food insecure and food insecure, and that food insecure students were 22% more likely to have a GPA between 2.0-2.49 and to report lower energy levels, and inability to concentrate. Nugent (2011) also found that lack of concentration is a large concern for food insecure students.

Finally, Silva et al., (2017) found that at the University of Massachusetts - Boston, food insecure students were 15 times more likely to fail a course and six times more likely to withdraw or fail to register for courses for the next semester than students who were food secure. In summary, food insecure students tend to have lower GPAs, an inability to concentrate, lower energy levels and attend class less frequently than their food secure peers.

## **Adaptive Behaviors**

In response to food insecurity, many college students reported adapting their behavior to ensure access to food. Colleges have also adapted the way they have addressed the issue. Two studies mentioned students attending campus events to access free food (Freudenberg, et al., 2011; Nugent, 2011). However, one of the most prevalent ways campuses are providing resources is through the campus food pantry.

### **Campus Food Pantries**

Studies focused on college student food insecurity began emerging in 2004 with the creation of food banks on college campuses as a resource. The first mention is a statement piece from the Canadian Association of Food Banks and the Canadian Alliance of Students Associations (Ferguson, 2004) and three years later food banks on college campuses were examined in the United States (Bidiman, 2007; Rondeau, 2007). These and other studies also looked at ways other than food banks to feed food insecure students such as food vouchers or money on campus meal plans (Bidiman, 2007; Cunningham & Johnson, 2011).

One of the few qualitative studies on college student food insecurity is a master's thesis (Nugent, 2011) conducted at a four-year university containing semi-structured interviews of students receiving services from college food banks in Canada. The study provides insight into campus food banks and the adverse academic outcomes and health risks associated with hunger as well as coping strategies utilized by students to combat hunger including utilizing a campus food bank. A recent qualitative study conducted across the University of California system (Glik & Martinez, 2017) utilized focus groups

to examine, among other things, coping strategies of food insecure students and found students were utilizing the campus food pantry among other coping mechanisms.

Not all campus food pantries are utilized. At CUNY, where over 40% of the student population surveyed indicated they were food insecure, only 7% of students reported taking advantage of food assistance on campus (i.e. food pantry, aid applying for food stamps) (Freudenberg, et al., 2011). A multi-institution nation-wide study recently discovered that 77.8% of students surveyed identifying as food insecure were not utilizing their campus food pantry (El Zein, et al, 2019). Some of the identified barriers were limited hours, regulated frequency of use, lack of knowledge about resources, and most significantly, the stigma associated with food pantry usage (El Zein, et al., 2019).

### **Eating Habits**

Several studies indicated students are altering their eating habits such as eating less or buying cheap and unhealthy food as a result of being food insecure (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Freudenberg, et al., 2011; Glik & Martinez, 2017; Goldrick-Rab, 2016; McArthur et al., 2017; Mukigi, et al, 2018; Nugent, 2011; Shive & Morris, 2006; Silva et al., 2017). Students at a mid-Atlantic public university recently reported eating less and being hungry (69%), and eating unbalanced meals (80%) (Payne-Sturges, et al., 2018).

A survey conducted primarily to examine fruit consumption patterns in community college students inquired into food insecurity at two California community colleges as a secondary question. Shive and Morris (2006) found approximately 25% of respondents ran out of money to buy food and; therefore, had to cut their food intake due to lack of money. This is similar to what Goldrick-Rab (2016) found, 24% of Wisconsin



two-year and four-year college students surveyed indicated within the past month they ate less or cut the size of their meals to save money. Previous studies reported as high as 78% of two and four-year food insecure students change their food shopping or eating habits and 27% of students reported not having enough money to buy food, ate less than they felt they should and cut the size of their meals (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2016). In addition, seven percent indicated they had gone without eating for an entire day (Goldrick-Rab, 2016).

At the University of Massachusetts -Boston, Silva, et al., (2017) found that 26.9% of students surveyed skipped a meal due to lack of money to buy food, similar to findings across the University of California system (Glik & Martinez, 2017) where students reported buying cheaper and unhealthy food such as Ramen Noodles and having friends swipe them into the dining hall to combat hunger. McArthur et al., (2017) found that students were planning meals before buying food and stretching food to make it last longer often resulting in decreased food intake. Finally, both Freudenberg, et al., (2011) and Nugent (2011) mentioned students purchasing cheap processed food in bulk or buying out dated or damaged food at a reduced cost as opposed to healthy fresh options.

### **College Response**

Colleges are responding in different ways to this growing concern. The CUNY report (Freudenberg, et al., 2011) made recommendations to address college student food insecurity on a city-wide level including increased student enrollment in the federal food stamp program, partnerships with local retailers, discounted healthy food options from campus dining, and more on campus food assistance programs such as food pantries. This demonstrates the need to further examine how to make food assistance resources safe and

easily accessible to students. Both Freudenberg, et al. (2011) and Chaparro, et al. (2009) recommended that resources for food insecurity should be tailored to specific campus needs, including setting up services to apply for the federal-food stamp program.

As indicated by an examination of who is at risk for food insecurity and adaptive behaviors adopted by food insecure students, the following behaviors occurred: cutting food intake; skipping meals; altering food shopping to opt for less expensive foods; utilizing campus food pantries; accumulating credit card debt specifically to pay for food; buying cheaper or damaged food that is often unhealthy; having friends swipe them into the cafeteria; attending on-campus events with free food; and enrolling in government assistance programs such as SNAP.

National initiatives are gaining momentum in addressing college student food insecurity. In an effort to better understand how the issue of college student food insecurity is being addressed on the national level, I next examine the history and success of initiatives such as Single Stop and The College and University Food Bank Alliance.

### **National Initiatives**

The College and University Food Bank Alliance (CUFBA) works with colleges, universities, and students to address student hunger. CUFBA connects more than 316 member institutions to one another, allowing them to share best practices in relieving college student food insecurity. CUFBA also gathers national data, suggests policies, and writes reports on student food insecurity (DeVeau, 2017). CUFBA recently merged with the Hope Lab to combine national research and resources for food insecure college students.

Another initiative dealing with a myriad of issues for two and four-year college students is Single Stop. The program is active in local community centers, hubs of service for military veterans and at community colleges. The mission is to “provide coordinated access to the safety net and connect people to the resources they need to attain higher education, obtain good jobs, and achieve financial self-sufficiency – all through a unique one-stop-shop” (Single Stop, 2017). According to the Single Stop website. Early reports show Single Stop can increase retention by double digits, helping families, increasing the skilled labor force, and growing the national economy.” Community colleges hosting food pantries and other hunger alleviation resources often do so in conjunction with a campus Single Stop program.

## **Conceptual Framework**

### **Safe Spaces**

To date, there has not been a study examining the intersection of gender, food insecurity and safe spaces; therefore, I explored each of these areas. The term safe space, when used in relation to education, is most often used metaphorically to describe diverse situations including literal physical locations or more commonly atmospheres that are temporal in nature (Rom, 1998). In his analysis of this terminology, Rom (1998) noticed a steady increase in its use to describe locations, situations, or contexts on college campuses since the early 1980s. Rom examined four instances of usage including two descriptions of teaching practices and two theoretical approaches and found when discussed in professional development settings, the term safe space most often is used figuratively. In terms of literal safe spaces to express food insecurity on college campuses, the literature includes food banks (Bidiman, 2007; Rondeau, 2007), yet does

not specifically name them safe spaces. For this reason, I explored other research focusing on safe spaces on college campuses.

### **Safe Spaces on Campuses**

College campuses began using the term “safe space” in connection with the civil rights movement to designate discrimination free learning environments for students of color (Booker, 2007). Shortly after, the feminist movement began using “safe space” to describe any space free of anti-feminist rhetoric and a haven for survivors of sexual violence (Campbell, et al., 2004; Carroll, 2015). Traditionally, research on safe spaces within the academy is situated around marginalized populations and in the creation of women’s centers (Kasper, 2004; Marine, 2011; Wies, 2011), multicultural centers and TRIO student services (Newlin, 2016; Patton, 2006a; Patton, 2006b), veteran services (Baker, & Leonard, 2017; Dillard, & Yu, 2016), Hillel and Christian Ministry Centers (Cherry, et al., 2003; Schmalzbauer, 2007, 2013), safe spaces for Muslim students (Ali & Bagheri, 2009; Nasir & Al-Amin, 2006) and this research focuses on creating literal spaces for traditionally marginalized populations. Interestingly, disabilities services were not mentioned as a safe space on college campuses even though universal design and accessibility on campus does impact a disabled student's feelings of safety (Dolmage, 2017). Notably absent from the research listed above are studies on low-income spaces and food bases resource spaces.

Recent research explores counter spaces for students of color (Carter, 2007; Hubain, et al., 2016) and women (Case & Hunter, 2012; Lewis, et al., 2015; McConnell, et al., 2016). Specifically, the research on counter spaces has focused on adaptive responses to oppression and challenging “deficit-oriented societal narratives concerning

marginalized individuals' identities.” (Case & Hunter, 2012, 257). Previous research on safe spaces for students of color indicates that individuals free from judgement and actively cultivating a welcoming environment are conducive to the construction of safe spaces (Newlin, 2016). Conversely, unsafe people exhibiting judgement can make any space unwelcoming (Newlin, 2016). These areas of research are important, as the academy has not always been a safe space for marginalized people, especially women, who can also be disadvantaged by their race, sexuality, disability, age or class (Morley, 1999).

Finally, a best practice for creating college safe spaces recommends allowing students to shape space to their own needs. This creates a place of comfort for them to be vulnerable and conduct deep and meaningful interactions (Byron, 2017). “Safe spaces are characterized both by the physical location and by the community that gathers there..... their meaning is contingent on the individuals who use the space” (pg.120) and space should be flexible” to allow participants to shape it to their own needs (Byron, 2017).

**Community Colleges.** Scant research exists regarding safe spaces on community college campuses. One study exploring a correlation between labor market trends and community college enrollment in the 1980s deemed community colleges as safe places, specifically “safe ports in a storm” (pg. 741, Betts & McFarland, 1995) for people struggling to find employment during times of high unemployment; however, literal physical safe spaces within the community college were not specified.

Community colleges have often been designated as safe spaces to start an education for students with marginalized identities (Seidman, 1995) and most of the

literature on safe programs at community colleges is centered on safety for marginalized populations. Rendón (1994; 2002), was one of the first to examine Latino/a community college student retention. Utilizing a theory of validation (Rendón, 1994), Rendón (2002) sought to identify the validation elements of the Puente Project, a program at 38 two-year colleges in California. She interviewed program staff to determine what accounted for the success of the program and found the need for a safe, affirming academic environment to ensure Latino student success. Similarly, Tovar (2015) indicated a combination of faculty support and academic counselors ensured a successful environment for Latino community college students, utilizing social capital theory and college impact models.

Wood and Palmer (2013) utilized self-determination theory to understand the personal goals of Black male community college students. They examined data from the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS), a national study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) for the purpose of understanding the experience of students in postsecondary education. Wood and Palmer (2013) specifically focused on the responses of Black male community college students and found these students must feel safe on campus in order to become self-determined to succeed and expand their psychosocial development, disappointingly the researchers gave no indication as to how to cultivate feelings of safety.

Other researchers explored safe space programs focused on non-traditional aged students or adult learners (Hyland-Russell & Groen, 2011; Lieb & Goodlad, 2005; Zwerling, 1992). Learning communities are often hailed as academic safe spaces (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Minkler, 2002). Tinto and Love (1995) conducted a longitudinal study of learning communities at LaGuardia Community College and found

that participants had higher GPAs and graduation rates. Perhaps due to the lack of a fixed physical location, Tinto and Love did not specifically name learning communities safe spaces until over a decade later. Finally, LGBT Safe Zones are popular at community colleges, yet very few community college campuses have LGBT Centers (Beemyn, 2012; Ivory, 2005) and research on LGBT Safe Zones, specific to community colleges is scarce.

**LGBT Safe Zones.** Identity is a framework or lens for much of the work and research in student affairs. The creation of LGBT Safe Zones is one example. Many campuses now host LGBT Centers (Rankin, 2005) yet, the most pervasive way LGBT students are allocated safe space is through Safe Zone programs. Safe Zones are designated by the presence of individuals who are trained to be safe for LGBT students. Most research on campus safe spaces has been done at four-year institutions. Research on LGBT Safe Zones demonstrates the ability to designate a particular area of campus as safe by training individuals to be safe people around a particular topic (Poynter, & Tubbs, 2008). Poynter and Tubbs (2008) found that LGBT Safe Zones are designated spaces on campus defined by those inhabiting that space, due to their training and willingness to serve as a safe person for LGBT individuals. In their examination of the history, function, development, training, membership assessment and political considerations surrounding safe spaces, Poynter and Tubbs (2008) are especially vocal about the efficacy of posting a specific safe “sign” as opposed to a blanket statement on anti-discrimination already included in the campus policy.

Conversely, LGBT Safe Zones are often critiqued and could provide insight into potential pitfalls in constructing any safe space. In their essay *(Un)Covering Normalized Gender and Race Subjectivities in LGBT "Safe Spaces"*, Fox and Ore (2010) state that

LGBT Safe Zones become complicated when not inclusive of all dimensions of diversity: “space discourse continues to operate within a normalizing gaze of a White, masculinist, middle-class subject, rendering queer subjectivity in a most simplistic and reductive manner and producing an illusory safety” (p. 631). Therefore, students who are not White middle-class males are often asked to forgo other aspects of their identities when entering a safe space, rendering those identities invisible. Students may choose to forgo a safe space that only caters to one aspect of their identity. This is important to consider because LGBT Safe Zones have been criticized as spaces where the intersection of identities and their complexities are lost to the overemphasis on one identity in these spaces (Fox & Ore, 2010). While students may not hold food insecure as an identity, low socioeconomic status is a prevalent identity for many students. I was curious whether participants in this study would identify their food insecurity and socio-economic level as an identity and if they felt they shared commonalities with other food insecure students.

Additionally problematic is discomfort with being designated a Safe Zone person and feeling pressure to receive Safe Zone training and display a Safe Zone sticker regardless of competence or comfort (Finkel, et al., 2003). In evaluating the Safe Zone program, Finkel, et al., (2003) found that only 50% of individuals Safe Zone trained displayed a Safe Zone sticker, leading researchers to question if people felt obligated to attend the training, rather than possessing a genuine interest in becoming a safe person for LGBT students. Some studies advocate for not pressuring faculty and staff to become Safe Zone trained (Poynter & Tubbs, 2008) while others find this rarely a concern (Poynter & Lewis, 2003).



**State of Safe Spaces.** When people feel safe, they are more apt to be open and share of themselves (Byron, 2017). Byron attempted to “queer the debate around trauma interventions and free speech by centering the figure of the traumatized student and consider what trigger warnings and safe space interventions might do for students, as opposed to what they do to students, professors, or society, and how we might use these debates to think more broadly about trauma and learning” (pg. 120) in a recent essay. He states, “safe spaces are characterized both by the physical location and by the community that gathers there..... their meaning is contingent on the individuals who use the space” (pg.120) and space should be flexible to allow participants to shape it to their own needs. Allowing students to shape space to their own needs creates a comfortable place for them to be vulnerable and conduct deep and meaningful interactions (Byron, 2017).

With increased awareness around trigger warnings, campuses are creating ground rules for discussion inside and outside the classroom to create safe spaces for discourse (Arao & Clemens, 2013; Byron, 2017). Arao and Clemens (2013) discuss framing dialogue around diversity and social justice as they attempted to define and deconstruct safe spaces via case studies. Through a case study methodology, they warn that we do a disservice to disenfranchised student populations when creating safe spaces by, “reinforcing expectations shaped largely by the very forces of privilege and oppression that we seek to challenge...” (pg. 140, Arao & Clemens, 2013). Arao & Clemens (2013) also found many that disenfranchised groups react with anger and frustration at the notion of safety as experience has taught them to distrust those in the position to deem a space as safe. Although, specific to students of color, this is also true of students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged.

Holly and Steiner (2005) conducted a survey of 121 baccalaureates and master of social work students at a western university to explore student perceptions of safe and unsafe classroom environments. Participants reported being more challenged to grow and learn about themselves and others in a safe classroom environment. Holly and Steiner (2005) reaffirmed that in the classroom safety does not always equate with comfort. I explored if comfort plays a role in making students feel safe as they seek resources for food insecurity.

Similar to the Byron piece, much of the literature on the state of safe spaces is in essay form as queer and feminist scholars tackle the subject. In their essay, Lewis et al., (2015) determined that a safe space for women on a college campus needs to be free from misogyny and triggers while allowing students to develop their full human potential. Human potential can only be cultivated if the environment is free from degradation, routine abuse, and marginalization (Lewis, et al., 2015). However, trigger warnings and safe spaces are not without controversy.

*Controversy.* Debates are occurring on many campuses between academic freedom, perceived student coddling, and the obligation not to re-traumatize (Byron, 2017). Arao and Clemens (2013) determined students often conflate safety with comfort. Similarly, critics of safe spaces often conflate re-traumatization of students with being uncomfortable with an idea. Criticism, specific to trigger warnings, focuses on the potential of students avoiding information they disagree with; therefore, stifling their exposure to diverse perspectives (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015). Pereira (2012) indicated, a “pedagogy of discomfort” could be important to allow students to engage with, critique and criticize the world around them (pg. 128). Yet, there is a distinct difference between

feelings associated with intellectual development and fear, which has no place in an academic setting (Lewis, et al., 2015).

Controversy around safe spaces has entered popular discourse. An op-ed in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Brown & Mangan, 2016) examined this controversy, soliciting opinions from various campuses around the nation, concluding that “few concepts in academia have been dissected, debated, mocked and defended in recent months as much as the ‘safe space’” (pg. 2). Brown and Mangan (2016) explain the dichotomy, “Either safe spaces are essential sanctuaries for members of historically marginalized groups, or they reflect a troubling desire to escape the rigorous intellectual inquiry college should be all about” (pg. 2).

The dean of the undergraduate college at the University of Chicago came under fire when a letter sent to incoming students was highlighted by news outlets including the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. In the letter, he warns that the college does not provide trigger warnings or intellectual safe spaces. A recent article published in *The Atlantic*, “The Coddling of the American Mind” (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015), made huge waves as it explicitly speaks out against trigger warnings and safe spaces. It was just one article against safe spaces and trigger warnings (see Kipnis, 2015; Shulevitz, 2015; Suk, 2014), all claiming that they infringe on academic freedom and freedom of speech. Some feel trigger warnings and safe spaces trivialize “real trauma” and others say they create an atmosphere of “panic.” While not empirical research studies, it is still important to consider opinion pieces, as they echo a sentiment held by many in academia.

Manne (2015) responded to the criticism in an opinion piece in the *New York Times* defending her use of trigger warnings not as a way to excuse students from

challenging assignments, but to prepare them in advance. Lukianoff & Haidt (2015), warn specifically about safe spaces being used to shield people from uncomfortable ideas being not conducive to learning. This is not, nor was it ever, the intent of safe spaces (Byron, 2017) and saying so trivializes the importance of safe spaces for individuals with marginalized identities.

**Safe Spaces for Women.** Research around women and safe spaces on campus is centered on the creation of women's centers. Although most community colleges do not have women's centers, and many are small enough not to warrant physical space for student clubs and organizations, a brief review of their evolution and purpose can provide insight into creating a safe space for female community college students. The University of Minnesota is cited as opening the first campus women's center in 1960 to accommodate part-time female students (Wies, 2011).

The missions of the first campus women's centers focused on vocational guidance and academic support. Eventually campus women's centers evolved to a home for feminist thought, political ideals, and a place of consciousness raising (Parker & Freedman, 1999). Women-only spaces allowed students to engage free from threats of psychological or physical harm (Brownmiller, 1999) and today women's centers still promote free expression and feminist discourse (Lewis, et al., 2015). Women's centers were always designed to be safe spaces for female college students, yet it was not part of their stated mission until the 1980s when a report for the Association of American Colleges (Hall & Sandler, 1984) indicated a chilly climate for female students and recommended women's centers explicitly become safe spaces on campus. An increase of

women's centers on college campuses evolved out of the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s (Byron, 2017; Nicholson & Pasque, 2011).

### **Food Insecurity**

I have yet to discover a study specifically examining safe spaces on college campuses related to food insecurity. Similarly, I did not discover any studies on safe spaces on college campuses for low-income and first-generation students. There is research around first-generation student housing and learning communities and TRIO programs such as VISIONS (program for low-income/first generation-students) but it yielded little usable data relating to this study.

The silence around hunger and its intersection with gender in a college setting is problematic as colleges should be safe spaces for all students. Some of the best practices in constructing safe spaces around other identities or topics are applicable to creating a safe space for students to disclose food insecurity. The success of creating spaces free of stigma and judgement such as LGBT Safe Zones provides insights, as food insecure students often experience stigma and judgment. Additionally, other best practices of safe spaces including freedom from violence, racism, sexism, and religious persecution are applicable to all marginalized identities including the economically marginalized. Creating a place where food insecure students can be vulnerable and have freedom to express their thoughts and feelings without stigma can be accomplished by following the example of other safe spaces on college campuses. I now examine gender as a category of analysis as gender is an integral part of my conceptual framework.

## **Gender**

Gender is a social category imposed upon biological differences and is inclusive of those identifying as non-binary and transgender. Joan Scott (1986) criticized ignoring the role gender has played in the construction of structural and ideological systems concerning relations between the sexes and indicated this is a way we marginalize and trivialize gender as a category of analysis. Her essay transformed how researchers began to think of gender and informed feminist research across disciplines (Butler & Weed, 2011). Scott was speaking specifically to gender as a category of historical analysis; regardless, her cautions can be relevant today in different contexts, specifically when gender is treated as a fixed and binary category.

The creation and origin of gender and gender identity is contentious. Research over several decades has reinforced the idea of gender identity for cisgendered individuals as firmly established in childhood and fixed in early adolescence (Bem, 1981, 1983; Davis, 2002; Galambos, et al., 1991 Harris & Harper, 2008; Kohlberg, 1966; Stiver, 1991). However, many scholars argue that gender is not just an identity or role taught in adolescence, but a system of social practices to create the binary of two distinct genders and a means to organize those genders socially in such a way that inequality exists on an institutional level (Ferree, et al., 1999; Glenn, 1999; Lorber, 1994; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004; Ridgeway & Smith-Lovin, 1999; Risman, 1998). Lorber (1994) contends, “The purpose of gender as a modern institution is to construct women as a group to be subordinates of men as a group” (p. 118). Gender, as a category of analysis, is fluid. Despite criticism of the use of gender as a category of analysis such as indicated

by Scott (1986), Lorber (1994) and others, it is a useful category when it intersects with social class.

**Gender and Poverty.** According to the National Center for Law and Economic Justice, in 2014, over five million more women than men were living in poverty in the United States and 31% of single female-headed households lived below the poverty line versus 16.4% for families headed by a single male. In Massachusetts, 10% of the adult male population lives in poverty versus 14% of the adult female population (Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 2014). Single women and women of color are disproportionately impacted by food insecurity (Nord, et al., 2011). Additionally, women are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity, as the rise in divorce rates has halved women's income (Teachman, et al., 2000; Zagorsky, 2005). Coupled with pay inequity and the gendering of professions these disadvantages are a means to keep women economically inferior resulting in increasing dependency on the state (Brown, 1981; Fraser, 1997; Okin, 2003). Although there is research regarding single motherhood and nutrition (Glanville & McIntyre, 2006; McIntyre, et al., 2003), single-motherhood, food insecurity and depression (Huddleston-Casas, et al., 2009), and food insecure single mothers and food assistance (Borjas, 2004), I found no research on food insecurity and deliberate single motherhood.

One of the only research studies looking specifically at female college student food insecurity examined the phenomenon amongst African-American students at a Historically Black College or University (HBCU). Female students at this HBCU experiencing food insecurity were significantly more likely to report drug use, conflicts with intimate partners, lower future orientation and lower self-esteem (Lin, et al., 2013).

**Gender and Food Insecurity Impact.** Food insecurity impacts women differently than it impacts men. Food insecurity and obesity are linked because of the high calorie and less nutritious food consumed by food insecure individuals (Drewnowski & Darmon, 2005; Kendall, et al., 1996). This pattern of consumption is standard across genders, but food insecure women report higher rates of obesity than men who are food insecure. Hernandez, et al., (2017) that found food insecure women were at a significantly greater risk of becoming obese. Utilizing the USDA Food Security Scale and National Health Interview Survey data, Hernandez, et al., (2017) that found low income food insecure men had 42% lower odds of being overweight and 41% lower odds of being obese than food insecure women. Comparing obesity rates among women, the study indicated low-income food insecure women were 40% more likely to be obese compared to a 32% obesity rate for low-income food secure women. Many researchers have examined this phenomenon and indicated one possible explanation is the correlation between enrollment in SNAP and obesity, especially in non-elderly women (Baum, 2011; Chen, et al., 2005; Gibson, 2006; Gibson, 2003; Meyerhoefer & Plylpchuk, 2008; Ver Ploeg & Ralston, 2016; Zagorsky & Smith, 2009.).

## **Conclusion**

### **Application to Current Study**

The literature clearly states students most at risk for food insecurity come from a low socioeconomic background when entering college, often indicated by financial aid eligibility and eligibility for government food assistance; living alone or women living with children as a single parent; being employed at least part-time as a further indicator of low socioeconomic status; and being financially independent with no familial aid.



These are all characteristics of community college students making them more vulnerable to food insecurity (Blagg, et al., 2017) and fit the profile for community college students at Massachusetts Community College (MCC).

MCC is located in a rural region of Massachusetts with high poverty rates, similar to the studies of Patton- López et al., (2014) in Oregon and McArthur, et al., (2017) in Appalachian North Carolina. Research in a rural setting is a rarity in college food insecurity research to date as most studies are conducted in urban settings, including those at community colleges.

Similar to other colleges, retention and completion is a concern at MCC. Only 24% of students graduate or transfer within six years. Food insecure students tend to have lower GPAs as well as lower overall academic performance leading to lower retention and completion rates as documented above. Addressing food insecurity may aid in student retention and completion at MCC. This study hoped to determine if students seek safe spaces to disclose food insecurity and identify them as such, where safe spaces are located for food insecure female community college students and what makes those spaces safe, in an effort to improve resources and improve retention of food insecure students at MCC.

Finally, the current literature on adaptive behaviors of food insecure students is helpful in identifying resources and potential safe spaces for food insecure students including the college food pantry as well as offices helping students apply for SNAP and other assistance programs. The literature identifying adaptive behaviors adopted by food insecure students includes cutting food intake; skipping meals; altering food shopping to opt for less expensive foods; utilizing campus food pantries; accumulating credit card

debt specifically to pay for food; buying cheaper or damaged unhealthy food; having friends swipe them into the cafeteria; attending on-campus events with free food; and enrolling in government assistance programs such as SNAP. These behaviors and resources were examined in the current study to determine their applicability to MCC and safe spaces for food insecure students.

### **Insights and Dilemmas**

None of the studies I located focuses solely on women students, only two are purely qualitative and few examine a community college population. Examining the literature affirmed the need to expand the scope of research on community college students who are food insecure. Research centered on four-year college student populations found many characteristics of food insecure four-year students (living without parental support, low-income, first generation, students of color, etc.) also characterize the general community college going population; therefore, some proposed solutions (food banks, meal vouchers, etc.) may be useful in alleviating food insecurity in community college students.

Studies of large public institutions such as the CUNY system, the Universities of Hawaii, Oregon, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Alaska and Alabama all provide insight into possible causes of food insecurity and possible solutions in addressing the problem. The increase of studies across community college systems such as Maryland and California is heartening and provides a reference point to inform this study.

However, there is little consistency in how college food insecurity is studied. Research is conducted on single campuses and across campus systems. There is no theoretical framework directly informing studies of food insecurity allowing researchers to compare

studies with one another and there is a lack of consistency in how findings are reported. While this study attempted to mitigate some of these concerns by building on past research and utilizing qualitative methods, it does not address all of the concerns. This study adds to the small body of qualitative literature in the hope of demonstrating the need for further studies expressing the experience of food insecure students.

Most studies conducted on college student food insecurity are quantitative. Although wide use of the USDA survey provides some consistency in methodology to compare findings between countries, states and campuses, it does not tell the story of food insecure student experiences. We, as a field of practice, have established food insecurity exists on college campuses through quantitative means, now it is time to hear from the students themselves as we attempt to understand their experiences.

Finally, it should be noted, numerous studies now exist on various aspects of college student food insecurity beyond the scope of this study. It is important to acknowledge their presence as they are contributing to a rapidly growing body of literature. Topics such as foodscapes; where a person obtains, prepares and consumes food (Calvez, et al., 2016), fruit and vegetable intake as a correlate of food insecurity (Mirabatur, et al., 2016), rates of food insecurity specific to urban first year students (Bruening, et al., 2016) psychological stress and behavioral indicators specific to food insecure female African American students at an HBCU (Lin, et al., 2013) and starting a food pantry on campus (Twill, et al., 2016) have all been studied.

### **Summary**

This literature review examined the growing concern over college affordability and its tie to college student food insecurity as well as the growing body of research

conducted over the past decade at community colleges, four-year colleges and universities and across college systems. Who is at risk for food insecurity, GPA and academic performance of food insecure students and adaptive behaviors were examined. A brief look at initiatives such as Single Stop and CUFBA demonstrate colleges are working successfully with non-profit programs to mobilize around food insecurity to share resources, research and best practices.

As a conceptual framework, I examined safe spaces on college campuses including their various uses, definitions and controversies. This examination included safe spaces specific to community colleges and LGBT Safe Zones as one model presenting challenges and successes. I also examined gender as a category of analysis, the intersection of gender and food insecurity, and the disproportionate ways women are impacted by food insecurity.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Rationale for Method of Inquiry**

The purpose of this study was to explore how female students at a small rural community college navigate food insecurity. Specifically, the problems addressed were whether safe and unsafe spaces are a part of students' experience with food insecurity and if so, how do female community college students identify and utilize safe spaces on campus to disclose and meet needs related to food insecurity? Additionally, does identity impact feelings of safety? As discussed in Chapter two, existing empirical research on college student food insecurity is limited in three ways: 1) a majority of the research is quantitative and the topic has rarely been addressed in qualitative measures, 2) most of the research is focused on four-year colleges and universities, and 3) none of the existing literature focuses on locating resources or safe spaces for food insecure college students as to date, research has been focused on merely documenting the problem.

To truly understand how community college students navigate food insecurity and where they locate safe spaces to disclose their food insecurity, a qualitative approach is warranted. Utilizing qualitative methods to uncover the experiences of food insecure female community college students allows for rich description of a complex phenomenon within a certain context focusing on the diversity, idiosyncrasies and unique qualities of the participants as they navigate food insecurity (Krathwohl, 2009).

#### **Grounded Theory**

Since existing literature has provided only a limited understanding of the dynamics of food insecurity for college-going women at a rural community college, I

utilized grounded theory. Constructivist grounded theory is well-suited to problems that can be discretely identified but are poorly understood. Constructivist grounded theory requires the researcher to engage with participants in order to fully understand their experience and situates the researcher as a subjective and active participant alongside research participants in generating data, as it recognizes no research or researcher can be truly objective. Grounded theory begins with an idea or a concept in need of exploration and relies on sensitization to existing concepts and theories. This is a delicate balance, as the researcher does not want these sensitizing concepts to result in analysis becoming deductive or focused on verification.

I chose a specific set of research questions to inform my study as a place to begin; however, grounded theory is an inductive research design and as such, I revisited my initial questions as I analyzed the data through a constant comparative approach. In grounded theory, the researcher draws upon and utilizes their own personal experiences in creating their research design and as a conceptual comparison as they gather and analyze data (Birks & Mills, 2015). The researcher articulates their own assumptions in order to identify their existing knowledge about the object of analysis (Birks & Mills, 2015). This is important when examining a highly sensitive subject such as food insecurity.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions were designed to elicit responses that could contribute to the community of practice around hunger in college. I asked questions centered on student ability to locate resources versus questions around personal experiences of hunger, as I did not want to contribute to the stigma and judgement often attached to food

insecurity. Grounded theory is useful when examining social processes and settings. Further, I tried not to portray participants as victims of their circumstances, but rather as partners in disrupting their own food insecurity. My focus on safe spaces was aimed at not pathologizing poverty and food insecurity. I also hope to contribute to the literature on food insecurity and safe spaces. My research questions were as follows:

- How do female community college students navigate food insecurity?
  - Are safe and unsafe spaces part of a student's experience of food insecurity? If so, does identity impact feelings of safety in certain spaces?
  - What campus resources do food insecure community college women identify as "safe spaces" in which to navigate the issues associated with their food insecurity?
  - Why do food insecure community college women perceive these spaces as safe?
  - Why do food insecure community college women perceive other spaces as unsafe?

### **Site**

Massachusetts Community College (MCC) was the site of this research project. I focused on a community college as they have received little attention in the literature and according to the National Center for Education Statistics (Radford, et al., 2015), 51% of community college students are in the lowest income group; therefore, community colleges are particularly vulnerable to having a food insecure student population (Nord, et al., 2011). In the academic year 2015 -2016, 51% of all MCC students were Pell eligible

and 67% qualified for some financial aid with 23% of students over the age of 25 and living financially independent. In the fall of 2017, 52.8% of students fell below the federal poverty line.

MCC is located in a rural mill town with limited public transportation and limited employment prospects. The college and local hospital are the two largest employers in the area and the unemployment rate is consistently 2-3% above the national average. Additionally, 19% of town residents are living below the federal poverty line; this is more than double the percentage of people in the seven surrounding towns. The college has 79 degree and certificate programs with the most popular being pre-health (requiring substantial lab fee), liberal arts, business, human services and nursing. Twice as many students plan on entering or continuing in the workforce upon graduation and enroll in career associates degree programs as in transfer associate degree programs. Only 24% of first time students graduate within six-years. The college has an average annual enrollment of 11,000 students inclusive of four campuses and online programs. MCC does not collect data on SNAP eligibility; however, in the fall of 2017, 52.8% of students fell below the federal poverty line.

I specifically chose MCC because it is already addressing college student food insecurity and allowed me to observe students navigating resources in a well-developed network. The problem of food insecurity at MCC is framed as a retention issue and as such, the college has been responsive to initiatives to alleviate food insecurity. As an employee of the college overseeing the campus pantry, I was curious if students saw it as a safe space and if so, how or why was it safe and if it was safe for students from all intersecting identities.



## **Sample**

My study focused on the experiences of cisgender women students at MCC. A focus on a single setting is warranted when there is a “solid basis for generalizing the concepts and the relations between them to units that were absent from the sample, but which represent the same phenomenon.” (Boeije, 2002, pg. 393). To fully understand the influence of gender, my sample included men and women. This strategy allowed me to examine if there were gendered patterns of food insecurity and resource utilization.

## **Participant Recruitment**

I conducted a series of semi-structured open-ended interviews with a convenience sample and data outcropping of food insecure community college students. Data outcroppings refer to a sample informed by prior experience in the field directing us where we are most likely to find participants engaged in the phenomenon we want to study (Luker, 2008). Prior work experience as an employee of the college who oversees the MCC campus food pantry, led me to identify a particular population of food insecure community college students as a data outcropping. As a potential safe space, the campus pantry might be the best place to study the intersection of food insecurity (an indicator of low-income status) and gender including if masculinity inhibits male students from identifying the pantry as a safe space. Finally, I recruited using a theoretic sampling frame to retain the ability to adjust sampling based on the emergent theoretical model.

Recruitment began with an email (see Appendix A) sent to all MCC students through my UMASS email account, with information on the new food pantry and a brief screening survey. At the same time, I recruited potential participants through the campus

food pantry. Students expressing interest through food pantry recruitment were asked to complete the screening survey. Recruitment continued until the desired number of participants was recruited (8) and the desired demographics were represented (5 female identifying; 7 out of 8 were low-income or self-identified as food insecure; diversity in race and age consistent with college demographics). See Appendix A for emails notifying students of acceptance into the study. Students who were willing to participate submitted a small demographics survey (see Appendix B) and were entered into a raffle for a \$10 gift card to the college bookstore. A sample of 8 students were selected based on diversity of gender, age, race, and parental status.

**Table 1: Participants**

Pseudonym	Race	Marital Status	Gender	Enrollment Status	Children	Disability	Age	Veteran
Rosie	Hispanic	Married	F	Still enrolled	2	No	36	No
Red	White	Married	F	Still enrolled	0	No	42	No
Kay	White	Married	F	Grad December 2018	4	No	33	Yes
Vera	Hispanic	Single	F	Still enrolled	1	Yes	32	No
Brother Chris	African American	Engaged	M	Graduated May 2019	0	No	44	No
Linda	White	Divorced	F	Still enrolled	3	Yes	58	No
John	Jewish and Hispanic	Single	M	not enrolled fall, was for summer	0	No	31	No
Emrys	African American and	Single	M	Graduated May 2019	0	Yes	33	No

	White							
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### **Data Generation**

In this study, the following principles of grounded theory were practiced: simultaneous data collection and analysis through constant comparison; constructing analytic codes and categories from the data rather than through testing a hypothesis; memo writing to elaborate on categories, explore their significance and leave an audit trail of the thought going into constructing codes, categories and data; and revisiting the literature review after analysis (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987).

#### **Primary Data Source: Interviews**

I conducted a series of two one-on-one semi-structured interviews per participant, approximately 3 months apart. One-on-one interviewing allows probing for significance and determining how individuals perceive their situation (Krathwohl, 2009) and is a generative way to elicit rich detail (Rossman & Rallis, 2011). Food insecurity is a sensitive topic and participants may be more forthcoming in a one-on-one setting as opposed to a focus group style interview (Turley, et al., 2016). Unstructured interviews are useful when exploring issues, however I chose semi-structured to allow for participants' perspective to be revealed on their own terms (Rossman & Rallis, 2011) while allowing for pre-determined questions and deviation from the interview protocol. The semi-structured interview protocol began with a set of questions (Appendix C) but allowed for deviation from those questions to pursue topics as they arose.

My interviews were transcribed following each interview to allow for the immediate emergence of patterns, ideas or possible additional lines of inquiry.

Interviewing practices entail recording and note taking to capture non-verbal interactions, thus allowing the participant to co-construct the interview process (Charmaz, 2014).

Constructivist interviews are a form of storytelling about what participants think happened or should happen and as such serve as a mental map of their experiences (Luker, 2008). Co-constructing the interview inclusive of participants' stories and silences developed social bonds between myself and participants and ensured the interview was a site for exploration, emergent understanding, identity legitimization and validation of experience (Charmaz, 2014). I was alert for and probed silences and hedging language such as “uh huh” or “um”. Successful interviewing involved techniques such as replicating conversational norms throughout the interview process by adjusting my vocabulary and body language as needed. As I responded to interview questions, I stopped to explore statements, request detailed information, and inquire about thoughts and feelings as I validated the participant’s humanity, perspective and actions (Charmaz, 2014).

Constructivist interviewing also entails being alert for “silent dialogues” (pg. 93, Charmaz, 2014), especially surrounding sensitive topics such as food insecurity. This dialogue is often about the interview itself and should be considered data. When dealing with sensitive topics, some participants attempted to exert control over the interview by side stepping questions or changing the topic.

The first round of interviews lasted an average of 45 minutes with a second round of interviews lasting an average of 25 minutes. The interview protocols (see Appendix C) were structured so participants were able to negotiate the time and place of the interview and steer the direction of the conversation based on guiding questions. Participants signed

a consent of participation form (Appendix D) and were provided with a clear definition of food insecurity, utilizing Anderson (1990, pg. 1560). Food insecurity in the United States is defined as the “limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways.”

The potential contribution that participants could make around this important topic was acknowledged and they were assured of continuing support for food insecurity regardless of participation in or completion of the study. In addition, the sensitive nature of the topic and the subsequent stress it may cause was addressed during participant recruitment and data collection. Finally, as an incentive, participants were offered a \$10 Barnes and Noble (college bookstore) gift card for each round of interview participation.

### **Photographs and Narratives**

Following the first set of interviews, participants were asked to photograph safe spaces on campus and text them to me prior to the second interview. Although this was not a requirement of participation in the second round of interviews, five students submitted photos. Students used their phones and texted the photos to me as they were taken. Participants were careful not to capture faces in their photos with one exception and I blurred the face to ensure anonymity. At the second interview participants constructed a narrative around the photos as to how and why this is a safe space on campus. As an incentive, those providing photos were offered a \$5 gift card for Dunkin’ Donuts. The second interview was also a time to explore themes and theoretical ideas that emerged during the first round of interviews, providing a “feedback loop that enables negotiation and validation of the adequacy of the interpretation” (pg. 88, Mojtahed, Nunes, Martins, & Peng, 2014). See Appendix C for second round interview question

protocol.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Memo Writing**

Analytic memo writing, an important tool throughout the data analysis process, begins with data collection. Memoing can aid in forming concepts, ideas, codes and categories and should continue throughout the entire research process (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser, 1978). Memo writing is the first step in providing structure to thoughts in a reflective space leading to the construction of a grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Finally, memo writing leaves an audit trail and lends credibility to qualitative research and data generation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Mertens, 2010; Saldaña, 2016).

### **Constant Comparative Approach to Data Analysis**

The constant comparative approach to data analysis ensures the researcher is engaging with the data throughout the research process. Identifying concepts and patterns while gathering data provides further direction for data generation as well as indicating when the researcher gathers enough data to ensure saturation (Krathwohl, 2009). Constant comparative analysis compares data to data and examines sequential comparisons and through this process of analysis, the researcher develops codes (Charmaz, 2014).

### **Coding Interviews**

In attempting to understand participants' experiences, my questions explored the personal and interpretive meanings found in the data; therefore, my coding practices reflected this including in vivo coding and emotion coding (Saldaña, 2016). Coding

separates and sorts data while categorizing short segments of data inclusive of transcripts, observational notes regarding surroundings, nonverbal behavior, and interaction between researcher and participant (Charmaz, 2014). Through the process of coding and utilizing constant comparative analysis, the researcher begins to identify “generalizable theoretical statements, that transcend specific times and places and contextual analysis of actions and events.” (pg. 113, Charmaz, 2014) Upon completion of coding, the codes are used to develop categories and subcategories.

I began the coding process with attribute coding to sort and provide context for further categorization. I included specific attributes of each participant at the beginning of each transcript inclusive of age, gender identity, income, major, marriage and parental status and race. I also included data related to the interview such as time of day, location and length of interview.

**Initial Coding.** Initial coding, often called open coding, can be line-by-line, word-by-word, or incident-by-incident and pays close attention to the data and asks the following questions: 1.) What is this data a study of?; 2.) What does the data suggest, pronounce, or leave unsaid?; 3.) What is the point of view?; and 4) what theoretical category does this particular data represent? (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In the initial coding phase, qualitative data is broken down into manageable parts that are closely examined and compared for differences and similarities (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The close examination of data allows for deep reflection on the contents and nuances of the data before beginning to assign codes, categories and properties to the data (Saldaña, 2016). In the initial coding phase, I utilized in vivo coding, as it utilizes the words spoken by participants as codes rather than renaming or

creating codes. In vivo coding prioritizes and honors participant voices (Saldaña, 2016).

However, as I was cleaning my transcriptions, I noticed patterns emerging. I conducted initial coding by hand and developed the first set of codes utilizing in vivo codes. Through this process, the following codes and themes emerged; location, strategies (to combat food insecurity); negative feelings; relationships; disability/illness; resources; and, safe. The first set of codes were then used to inform questions in the second interviews (see Appendix C).

**Axial Coding.** Axial coding relates categories and subcategories by specifying the properties and dimensions of these categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Charmaz, 2014). Strauss and Corbin (1998) recommend examining conditions, actions/interactions and consequences in axial coding. In constructivist grounded theory, as analytic strategies are emergent, the links between categories and subcategories also reflect how the researcher makes sense of the data (Charmaz, 2014). Each code or category; location, strategies (to combat food insecurity); negative feelings; relationships; disability/illness; resources; and, safe had several subcodes further defining the code and adding dimension to the code.

**Focused coding.** Focused coding entails deciding which initial codes to keep and how they will categorize the data. Focused coding takes the most significant or frequent codes developed during the initial coding stage and analyzes the data again through the lens of these codes to develop categories and themes. Focused coding is more theoretical than line-by-line word specific coding. Through this process, you begin to “synthesize, analyze and conceptualize larger segments of data” (pg. 138, Charmaz, 2014). When determining what data to utilize as focused code, the following is considered: 1.) What do



you find when you compare initial codes with the data?; 2.) How do initial codes reveal patterns?; 3.) Which codes best account for the data?; 4.) What does comparison between codes indicate? ; and 5.) Do the focused codes illuminate gaps in the data? (Charmaz, 2014). During this second stage of coding, a combination of a priori (predetermined) codes are examined based on the research questions and sensitizing concepts in the literature as well as emergent codes are identified and investigated.

While coding the second round of interviews and re-coding the first round, some codes began to resonate more than others and emerged as stronger themes which then began to inform the theoretical coding phase.

**Theoretical Coding.** Theoretical coding is the final primary coding stage in grounded theory that aims to discover the central category identifying the theme of the research and suggests a theoretical explanation for the phenomenon (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Saldaña, 2016). This round of coding should attempt to address the how and why by reflecting on all developed codes, categories and analytical memos. Theoretical code names may be in previously developed codes or may emerge from combining similar codes. Finally, additional or selective sampling of new or existing participants may be necessary to identify any variation to the developing theory (Saldaña, 2016).

### **Coding Photographs**

Coding the photographs began with a memo of initial impressions of the image relating to the question of safe spaces and then move to creating codes based on visual details that either confirm or contradict initial impressions (Saldaña, 2016) in addition to the narrative participants construct and their arguments supporting those narratives during the second interview. Finally, I captioned each photograph with the prominent codes it

embodies.

## **Data Quality**

### **Researcher Subjectivity and Positionality**

Constructivist grounded theory supports the use of the researcher's prior knowledge and experience as a starting point for developing ideas and concepts to guide a study (Charmaz, 2014). As an employee of the college who oversees the campus pantry, I was transparent in my positionality by assuring that potential participants' services through the pantry would not be impacted by declining to participate. My positionality to this study goes beyond my employment and is a direct result of my identity as a feminist and my belief in approaching research and practice through a social justice lens. Grounded theory asks the researcher to look at their subjective self and reflect on their vantage point including an awareness of their own ontological and epistemological influences and allegiances and how these lay the foundation for their study. To accomplish this, I employed reflexive practices. In doing so, I examined assumptions and my position of power as a White middle-class woman and an employee of the college where I was conducting my study so as to not misrepresent or co-opt participant's experiences. I engaged in reflective memo writing in addition to traditional analytical memo writing. I shared my work with colleagues for feedback on my level of subjectivity.

### **Confidentiality and Trustworthiness**

The study was constructed to be trustworthy based on the three criteria for trustworthiness set forth by Rossman and Rallis (2012); ethically conducted, producing credible data, and acknowledging positionality and subjectivity. Although anonymity

cannot be guaranteed in qualitative research, I ensured confidentiality (Willis, et al., 2008) by having participants choose a pseudonym. To enhance trustworthiness, prior to formal data analysis, member checks of interview transcripts were conducted and participants were given the opportunity to add additional thoughts and commentary about the research experience to the data. Only one participant corrected a statement (wrong transfer college name was transcribed). Member checking ensures data is accurate and representative of participant's feelings and thoughts. Although not a formal participant research project as participants did not aid in the design of the study, I subscribed to some of the best practices and underlying values of participant research such as choosing relevant topic; employing an iterative research design; a commitment to justice, mutual respect and trust; reflexivity; and engaging the beneficiaries of the research in the process (Biggs, 1989; Cohen, et al., 2013).

Finally, by utilizing in vivo coding methods, I stayed grounded in the data and in student's experiences. I acknowledge that as the researcher, I hold a certain power in allowing participants to construct their own meaning and in how I interpreted that meaning during analysis.

### **Credibility, Rigor and Ethical Considerations**

The study was ethically conducted based on the norms for acceptable and competent research practice with a sensitivity to the highly personal and often politicized topic of food insecurity. The interview protocol (Appendix B) guaranteed participants' ability to negotiate the terms of participation during any phase of the study. Similarly, the study is credible as the data is derived from the expressed experiences of the participants and the data analysis was inductive. By situating myself in the study as

subjective and being transparent about my positionality on this highly politicized topic, I helped to ensure the data is valid and credible.

I utilized Charmaz's (2014) and Saldaña's (2016) qualitative coding methods when analyzing the transcripts as they retain participant voices while simultaneously reflecting on what was present and what might be missing from the data. I began my initial analysis while in the collection stage by utilizing a constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2014).

Analytic triangulation is useful to understand the data more fully (Leech, & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). Interviews provided participant experience but to round-out the data, I asked participants to photograph their safe spaces on campus. During the second round of interviews, I asked participants to narrate their safe space as I sought to understand what makes those spaces safe.

### **Limitations**

This study was comprised of a convenience sample of self-identifying food insecure students at one community college in Massachusetts. There are limitations to sampling in this manner, as certain voices may not be heard. For example, students who do not respond to the email call for participants could still be food insecure for a variety of reasons but were not sampled. Additionally, students who are low-income might not have had the time to participate leading to only the more affluent or better resourced students participating. There was a lack of response by male students who had children, and LGBT diversity was lacking. I strove to be as inclusive as possible and recruited students both via email and through the campus pantry located on the campus of MCC.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **FINDINGS**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter begins with brief vignettes of each participant's experience with food insecurity and campus resources. I then describe the themes and patterns discovered in the data analysis process and break down these themes as they relate to the literature on food insecurity including contributing factors to food insecurity, stigma and adaptive behaviors to combat food insecurity. I engage in a discussion on participants' experience with safe spaces and conclude with a summary of findings including the important finding; participants did not hold food insecurity as an identity or as something caused by or entwined with their other identities. Finally, I explore why students may not hold food insecurity or low-income status as an identity yet low socioeconomic status is a prevalent identity for many community college students and many students identified themselves as low-income.

#### **Vignettes**

Emrys sits in a relaxed manner in a black leather chair in the food pantry but as he begins to talk about his experiences with food insecurity, he visibly tenses. His toothless grin disappears and a small stutter appears as we discuss his struggles. When he speaks of the people he trusts most on campus, his eyes well with emotion. He seems as if he is trying to make himself smaller and his demeanor takes on that of a child versus a man in his forties. Emrys talks about the college food pantry, the disability services office and counseling services as the places he feels most safe on campus and where he goes for resources to access food.

At first glance, Vera looks intimidating. She has full-sleeve tattoos, pink and black hair and often speaks in profanities. However, upon closer inspection, her tattoos are mostly Disney themed and her rough exterior masks a sensitive mother and artist. She has been ridiculed often for her use of food stamps and as such is sensitive about the topic of food insecurity. Vera considers VISIONS and the food pantry the places she is most comfortable asking for resources for her food insecurity. She overcomes the stigma associated with her food insecurity and speaks on behalf of her daughter and in the hope that her daughter will not experience the same struggles in the future.

Red has a heavy Polish accent that often sounds sharp and authoritative to U.S. ears, but she is a kind and loving person who has chosen to dedicate her life to the field of human services. When she speaks of food insecurity, her focus is more on helping others as opposed to focusing on her own needs. Red does not seek resources in any particular space, but has very clear ideas on what would make a space safe should she need food resources for herself or others.

Brother Chris, a tall African American man in his 40s, is a gentle soul. As he discusses his past and current struggles with food insecurity, his posture changes and his shoulders slightly curve. He is that rare combination of proud and humble. A former addict, he turns to religion for guidance and support. He firmly believes it is his duty to help others and is dedicating his career to being of service to those who are most in need. Brother Chris has no problem approaching the food pantry to ask for resources and encourages

others to do so as he attempts to destigmatize food insecurity on campus as a volunteer in the pantry.

When Rosie, a Hispanic human services student smiles, it is truly contagious. She can be self-deprecating and self-confident. As a mother of two young children, she is very sensitive to their needs and to ensuring they have a better childhood than her or her husband. When she speaks of being food insecure, she stresses that her children should never know hunger and never have to worry about financial concerns. However much she tries to hide these challenges, she knows her children are aware on some level. Rosie seeks resources from the people she already knows and from places where she already feels safe. Rosie views safety in both physical and psychological terms.

John appears apprehensive about speaking on food insecurity and often struggles with the words to describe his current situation. A musician, his appearance is less than conventional, but as a young man, he easily passes as a college student in the process of discovering himself. He never fully settles into the rhythm of the interview and does not respond to a second interview request. John never follows through in asking for resources to address his food insecurity and has trouble articulating why.

Kay speaks with a slight lisp and has the bearing of someone who is used to living and working in a male dominated environment. As a recent veteran, she uses a tough exterior to mask her tenderness. Kay is the mother of four, the wife of a pastor and a human services student. She is compassionate and caring. She is also unapologetic and secure in

her use of on and off campus resources to support her growing family. By the time of her second interview, she discovered she was pregnant with her fifth child. While Kay seeks most of her resources off campus, she does utilize the food pantry from time to time and feels most comfortable speaking to faculty or staff who already know her and know about her growing family and growing needs.

Linda, a grandmother in her fifties, walks with a limp and always looks tired. She speaks slowly and with deliberation while trying to keep emotion out of her voice. She has visible tics and her life-long struggle with poverty, disability and hunger show in how she carries herself. Tall and broadly built she tries to shrink to make herself less noticeable, especially when she is asking for help. Linda seeks out resources to address her food insecurity through offices and individuals she has already established a relationship with and she trusts such as the VISIONS office, the food pantry and disability services.

## **Findings**

The overarching question for this study was, how do female community college students navigate food insecurity? To answer this question, the following sub-questions were posed: are safe and unsafe spaces part of a student's experience of food insecurity and if so does identity impact feelings of safety in certain spaces?; what campus resources do food insecure community college women identify as "safe spaces" in which to navigate the issues associated with their food insecurity?; and why do food insecure community college female students perceive these spaces as safe?

Through analysis of the interview transcripts, the following codes and themes



emerged; location, strategies (to combat food insecurity); negative feelings; relationships; disability/illness; resources; and, safe. Gender was rarely mentioned and did; therefore, not warrant the creation of a code. In this chapter, I review the findings as I highlight and explore the most prevalent themes centering on stigma, which is common in literature around food insecurity; reasons for being food insecure such as addiction, generational poverty, disability or illness (their own or within their family); resources (where students go for help) and concepts of safety and security often manifested in relationships with individuals on campus. By far the most prevalent theme was the connection between safe spaces and safe people. Safe spaces are only safe due to the people inhabiting those spaces. All of the participants mentioned safety in terms of safe people inhabiting a space or unsafe people making a space unsafe. A safe person was defined by participants as someone who is welcoming, non-judgmental, empathetic, kind, compassionate and encouraging.

Researchers have examined several factors that may affect students' risk of being food-insecure. To begin, risk factors such as student living arrangements, marital status and parenthood, financial aid and income, student employment, college affordability and gender are examined related to the research findings.

### **Student Living Arrangements**

Students who live with their parents and students who live on campus are less likely than others to face food insecurity (Chaparro et al., 2009; Davidson, 2015; Micevski, et al., 2014) Community colleges in Massachusetts do not provide on campus - housing, so living off campus was not optional for participants. For participants, there was no difference in the level of food insecurity between those living with parents and

those living on their own (roommates, alone, married, etc.). Vera lived with her parents and explained that she pays rent and buys her own groceries for her and her daughter. Emrys lived with his mother and younger brother and contributed to food expenses with his SNAP benefits. The ability to pool SNAP benefits with his brother (also on disability) was a resource for Emrys. John bounced between divorced parents and provided his own food. When asked if he had trouble accessing enough food John stated:

My family, economically, is all set but I'm on my own. And my family has very specific diets that do not incorporate the foods that I eat. And the way my family is, my stepmom does not make meals for the whole family, everyone seems to make their own meals. And then I have to be aware of eating their food too, so they'll be protective of it.

For John, living with parents directly contributed to his food insecurity. Neither family home provided food for John or shared food with him. Therefore, he secured his own food, something he could not afford to do on a regular basis.

### **Marital Status and Parenthood**

Married students without children are at the least risk for food insecurity whereas single students living alone and single parents are at a greater risk for food insecurity (Chaparro et al., 2009; Maroto, et al., 2014; McArthur, et al., 2017). This was true for Red who was married, had no children and was the most food secure participant. Rosie was episodically food insecure and this was attributable to her marital status as her husband only had steady work in the spring and summer months. Rosie expressed frustration with her situation, stating that had she been unmarried with two children she would be eligible for subsidized housing, food and daycare and; therefore, be more food secure. In her words, Rosie was “following the rules” and was penalized for not being

“poor enough.”

Rosie spoke of her challenges in finding affordable and adequate day-care due to her husband's seasonal employment. Their annual income did not accurately reflect their disposable income throughout the year. She received a voucher for a free child-care spot, but found out later it was an error in the paperwork. Rosie was unable to afford to pay out of pocket and had to quit her job to stay home with her children when they were younger. Although the family annual income did not qualify them for free or subsidized daycare, they struggled throughout the winter months to pay for food, heat and daycare.

Kay also indicated childcare as a barrier to work:

After we had our second daughter, my husband is the one that just worked, because it's too expensive to do childcare and both of us work. So he just always works.

MCC provides income contingent childcare on campus but there is often a long wait for placement even though students are given preference. In cases like Rosie's, students may not qualify for the subsidy while not making enough to pay for private daycare. Being married and/or being a parent was an experience unique to the females in this study. Therefore, there is no way to determine if male students would have experienced similar challenges.

### **Financial Aid and Income/College Affordability**

A predisposition for food insecurity exists for students who receive financial aid (Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Hughes et al., 2011). All but one of the participants received some form of financial aid, one participant received veteran benefits providing tuition, fees and a living stipend, and many received state benefits (disability, food stamps, and fuel assistance) as low-income individuals. John did not receive financial aid because he was

considered a dependent of his father and; therefore, his household income was too high. However, his family provided no financial assistance or resources other than housing.

While community colleges are more affordable options for many students, participants in this study mentioned other associated costs which were prohibitive such as food, housing, books, lab supplies, health insurance and transportation. Participants spoke of the need for resources beyond food. Emrys mentioned budgeting \$100 per month for bus transportation. Vera spoke of non-food needs as well:

And next semester I'll be on campus more, and that's mainly what I was stressed about. It's like, "How am I going to afford gas?" I just cut it now that I have enough money to pay my bills and get stuff done, and take care of my kid, but sometimes I'm struggling for gas and little things. I've basically quit smoking cigarettes. I make a pack last me almost three weeks now.

Financial aid clearly does not cover the true cost of college for most students. For many of the participants in this study, life-long struggles with poverty prepared them for financial struggles during college.

### **Pre-existing Circumstances**

Pre-existing circumstances such as childhood poverty are often a cause of continued food insecurity in college (Davidson, 2015, Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Mai, 2014). Low socioeconomic status entering college is prevalent for many community college students. Participants shared stories of their childhood poverty. Brother Chris recalled ways his mother navigated their food insecurity when he was a child:

I remember a lot of times giving my little brother food, so that he could eat, and going to bed with a hungry, hungry stomach. I remember those days. I remember the headaches

that it causes. I remember the stomachaches that it causes.....At this time I was eight or nine years old (my brother) was two years younger than me, so he was six or seven years old.....I remember Mama bringing home groceries and saying, "Don't you open that refrigerator," because we only had so much to eat.

And my ma's, one of my most favorite quotes was, sometimes we would have things like okra or liver and you know, we would throw it out the window or throw it in the garbage. And my mother said, "If I find any food in that garbage, you're going to take it out and eat it, because there's starving people in the world that would love to have the meal you're having right now. And how dare you throw my hard earned money away like that?" That's what really opened my eyes.

Brother Chris admitted that even when he was more food secure, he didn't eat very much. He conditioned himself to eat less and eat less often. Students who were low-income throughout their lives expressed more comfort in asking for resources. Brother Chris discussed learning skills from his mother on how to navigate food insecurity by meal planning and rationing food.

Higher socio-economic status (SES) families pass on skills to navigate the world or practice “concerted cultivation” (Lareau, 2011), often resulting in a sense of entitlement when interacting with institutions of higher education (McDonough, 1997). Conversely, participants in this study who grew up in poverty indicated a comfort level in advocating for themselves and seeking resources. As in the case of Brother Chris, growing up in poverty he learned survival skills from observing his mother navigate social systems and as a result felt more comfortable seeking out and accepting resources for food insecurity on a college campus. Brother Chris, the only participant to acknowledge visiting pantries in childhood, mentioned frequenting food pantries with his

mother. Other survival skills such as meal planning and food rationing (including skipping meals) were mentioned by several participants.

Lower-income families rely on cultural capital to navigate their economic challenges and pass this capital on to their children (Beagan, et al., 2017; Henry, 2017) including purchasing food, preparing food, and learning to subsist on less-healthy food options. Brother Chris spoke of his mother shoplifting to provide food for the family:

It's another funny story, which is not really funny, but ... if I remember correctly, I was about 10 years old. My mother, we pulled up to the grocery store... my brother and I ... we were sitting in the car while she's making groceries. And one hour, two hours, three hours, four hours pass by. The way I got the story was Mama was shoplifting groceries

But Mama didn't know nothing about shoplifting groceries. She wasn't doing it well. She just picked up the cart and was kind of trying to slide it past the door. And they stopped her, of course, and asked her what she was doing and everything like that. And she told them our situation. And the officer that was handling her, said, "Okay ma'am. I understand." Back in that day, you could say, "Okay I understand. Take this home to your family and we'll give you help."

Brother Chris absorbed a message on the kindness of strangers from this encounter and indicated he had never attempted to shop-lift in order to feed himself. However, his experiences with childhood poverty shaped his relationship to food. Rosie grew up in a food secure household, but her husband, who was often hungry as a child, was adamant that his children not worry about food:

For my husband, he grew up in the projects, very poor. Going without type of thing. So, it's almost like a regression for him. There's a lot of emotions and memories tied to going without, that he doesn't want to go back too, I

remember there was one day when my daughter was ... it was one of those days where it was like day before grocery shopping, where pantries are bare and she started crying. Freaking out that there wasn't enough food to eat. And my husband instantly got up. He's like, we're going to go down to the store right now. He didn't ever want- her to feel that we didn't have enough food to eat. And it was just a matter of circumstance. Like, okay, there's nothing in the cabinet right now but we have ... we can find a few dollars to go get something. But I could see it trigger something in him that he didn't ever want her to feel that there wasn't enough.

Regardless of her husband's efforts, Rosie's daughter still had a level of awareness:

Because she knows in the winter, money is tighter. We're not going to go out and do as much fun stuff. And we buckle down in the winter. So she thought that it was getting to the point where we didn't have enough money for food. And it was sad. It was like, we should never be in a place where we don't have food to eat, even if we didn't have the money to buy food, we have family around here. We have friends. They know when I was in that place where there wasn't money to buy food, I would call up my mom or my sisters and say, "Hey, can we swing by for dinner. Do you have an extra room?" To me, that's better than saying, "Hey can I borrow \$50?"

### **Student Employment**

Research suggests that students who are employed are at a greater risk for food insecurity, perhaps due to low-income status and the need to work (Freudenberg, et al., 2011; Patton- López et al., 2014). This was not true for the participants in this study, regardless of gender or income level. Only one participant worked either full or part-time and this was surprising, because more community college students work versus those at four-year colleges (Anderson & Nieves, 2020). Red did not work, but was supported by a husband who worked full-time. Brother Chris was recently laid-off so decided to pursue school full-time and John faced long term unemployment before returning to school.

Rosie owned her own cleaning company in addition to being a realtor, a part-time student and a parent of two. Her husband had a seasonal job, so her food insecurity was episodic, most acute from November - March. Kay was supported by her husband who was a pastor for a church so they received free housing at the rectory. She volunteered at the church as was expected of the spouse of the pastor. Since the second interview, Vera took a work-study job at the college, but at the time of the study was unemployed. Emrys and Linda were on disability and unable to work without impacting their benefits.

### **Veterans and Their Families**

Veteran students are more vulnerable to food insecurity than non-veteran students (Goldrick-Rab, et al., 2019; Cady, 2016; Phillips, et al., 2018). Kay was a veteran with an income derived largely from veteran benefits, hers and her husband's. She spoke of the ease in accessing veteran benefits on campus because she was automatically enrolled in the program before she started classes, she believed that all resources such as the food pantry should automatically enroll students. For Kay, veteran services was a safe space, as it is for many veteran students (Baker, & Leonard, 2017; Dillard, & Yu, 2016). Kay mentioned visiting veteran service on campus:

The only place I've been so far is the Vet Center.

Interviewer: Okay. How did you hear about the Vet Center?

Kay: When I enrolled, it just automatically put me into that group because I'm a veteran. So it just added you to the e-mail and then you go from there. So I received the email in the very beginning. I've been there mostly for turning in paperwork and I went there for my scholarship to get fixed, but sometimes I just go in to get free coffee.

Kay's husband also received disability from the Army:



But after we had our second daughter, my husband is the one that just worked, because it's too expensive to do childcare and both of us work. So he just always works. He does get disability for the Army, but he still has worked some time.

Disability was a factor for other participants besides Kay. As mentioned above both Linda and Emrys did not work as they were on disability SSI benefits at the time of the study.

### **Disability**

Over 50% of students with documented disabilities attend community colleges (Raue & Lewis, 2011). Although there is little research on disability, college students and food insecurity, the Real College Survey measuring hunger and homelessness found among community college students, 58% of food insecure students were disabled (Goldrick-Rab, et al., 2019). This correlates with data on food insecurity in the general population. Two participants in this study were disabled and relied on SSDI benefits including SNAP.

Linda has been on social security disability for the past seven years. In those seven years, SNAP was her prime source of food. She periodically visited the food pantry in her hometown, but did not always have reliable transportation. Linda utilized her maximum allotment of items at the MCC food pantry every month and lived in low-income subsidized housing with her teenage son and reported periods of homelessness. Linda stated her main reason for returning to school is to “get off disability” and find employment.

Emrys took a photo of the disability services office on campus as one of his safe spaces. When asked to explain the picture, he offered the following:

(the disability services coordinator) is a wonderful person and even next door, disabilities office staff), I didn't think to take a picture of (staff) either but (coordinator) is another 'cause being disability I'm also ... I have a separate learning disability and emotionally and ... so even she said, "Well, you can take a picture in my office too." I even asked her.

This office was in the same suite as the college counselor. Emrys offered that this whole suite was a very safe space for him on campus. Emrys's father contributed \$300 per month, \$200 of which Emrys paid to his mother in rent. He spent the other \$100 on transportation (he did not drive) and food. Speaking of the campus pantry, Emrys said:

I'm not afraid to admit it, but I'm grateful that it's here. It's very helpful, if I need something. It even helps save me on some things. My mom always bugs me to get sugar, and I'd be seeing sugar in the food pantry. Even my mom would be asking me now to help. So, it helps.

Vera also indicated disability services was a safe space:

I've gone to (disability services staff person) office for actually a variety of things ranging from the help from the child care and the parent's group. Then as well she also does some of the disability coordination. So, I worked with her for that because that was my big thing was like just my mental disabilities are what made everything really hard the first time.

While participants such as Linda and Emrys mentioned college as a pathway off disability benefits, their disabilities were impacting their ability to provide enough income to sustain themselves and their families while in school.

## **Gender**

This study sought to understand the intersection of safety, identity, food insecurity and gender. While women are at higher risk for food insecurity (McArthur, et al., 2017; Shive & Morris, 2006), there was no difference in the level of food insecurity between

males and females in the study. A survey of all MCC students may yield different data. Gender also did not determine willingness to use resources on and off campus. Although John did not admit as much, he was afraid of the stigma associated with utilizing the pantry as was evidenced by his lack of completing the registration and utilizing the pantry despite repeated attempts.

Emrys was comfortable going to the pantry and asking for help because he was comfortable with the people working in the pantry. Had the pantry been populated with strangers, perhaps he would have been reluctant. Emrys expressed reluctance in seeking other resources on campus unless he was comfortable with the people in charge of those resources such as disability services and counseling services.

The women in the study mentioned physical comfort as an important marker of safety. Rosie spoke of finding comfort close to the front office and in a well-lit area of campus. Red defined a safe space, as one that had the “comforts of home.” She discussed having a place to relax, recharge her phone and grab a snack. Below are the two photos submitted by Red to demonstrate “comforts of home”. These were taken at a satellite campus where Red has taken most of her courses.

**Image 1: Kitchen**



**Image 2: Chair**



Both men and women indicated many of the same things that make a space feel safe such as a private and convenient location, a welcoming environment consisting of staff who are empathic, non-judgmental, kind, compassionate and encouraging. Another key element to safety is dignity. Dignity in being able to select their own food, dignity in being able to select personal hygiene products and a general normalization of hunger on campus was important for both genders. Vera was particularly vocal about this when she told of a pantry volunteer allowing her to go over one item in a month she needed shampoo and the volunteer said:

Normally we don't let things carry over, but she's like it's just one shampoo, she's like I don't see that as being an issue. She's like its personal hygiene, like I'm not gonna tell somebody like no you can't be clean.

Although the men mentioned some of these important elements for a safe environment, safety seemed more of a concern for females. The two men who decided to utilize the pantry, expressed determination to utilize the resource regardless of feelings of safety and had not consciously thought of safety before I asked. However, when probed,

it was clear all participants' feelings of comfort and safety impacted their willingness to utilize the pantry and seek resources for food insecurity. Perhaps women are conditioned to think of safety more than men. Women often described safety in terms of physical space and an awareness of their surroundings. If probed, Brother Chris might have expressed similar sentiments as he is an African American man on a predominantly White campus.

Rosie described a safe space on campus as one near the security office and with good lighting. Conversely, when asked to take a photograph of safe spaces on campus, Rosie took a picture of a classroom where she took a summer course in Reiki. Stating it was her favorite course to date, she said the people in the space, especially the instructor, made her feel safe. As referenced earlier, participants in other studies have reported being more challenged to grow and learn about themselves and others in a safe classroom environment (Holly & Steiner, 2005). Nonetheless, Holly and Steiner (2005) reaffirmed that in the classroom safety does not always equate with comfort. Rosie was the only participant to photograph or mention a classroom as a safe space. When taking the Reiki course, Rosie indicated she felt safe and comfortable and that is what her photo represents to her. However, were she to go to that space when class was not in session, it would cease to be a safe space. It was only safe because of the people in that space.

**Image 3: Classroom**



### **Stigma**

Participants expressed concern about the stigma of food insecurity as closely associated with their feelings of safety. Two participants mentioned being judged by others while in line at the grocery store. Rosie spoke of the embarrassment she felt:

When I think about that, it reminds me of going to the grocery store, filling up the grocery cart, going to the register, and the card not working. So I don't have enough money. There are several times where I had to walk away, and just leave my grocery cart there. And try and figure out, why don't I have enough money. Some random bill I forgot about went through, or ..... you know. Yeah, it's like you put two or three items back, and then after that you're like, you know what? I'm just going to walk away, because you're so embarrassed. That it didn't work. So I've done that a few times.

Other participants spoke about feeling shamed by other customers at the grocery store. Vera said:

Actually one of the most hurtful experiences to me when I first had my daughter when she was old enough to just start

eating baby food, I breastfed so I never did the WIC formula or anything like that so they gave me extra fruits and veggies and some little things. This was right before they switched over from doing cards and still had the actual checks where you had to like do everything and I grabbed the wrong item on accident and I didn't qualify. I was going through trying to find the check for the baby foods, the check for the milk and give her each thing. For some reason one of the things weren't qualifying but I bought the same thing with the check at another store before... I had grabbed low fat instead of whole.

The lady at the cash register was very nice, helped me was like oh, I realize what the problem is and then like as she's doing that and going to get the other thing there is an older lady behind me. The lady's just rolling her eyes the whole time, doing the huff, and I just figured it's just because I was taking a while. I was like, sorry, there was like five other things open she could've gone to. She's standing there and she's like, since you're taking forever can I just get help before you. I'm sitting there holding my baby, trying to calm her down.

Yeah, and I'm just like about to have an anxiety meltdown, I'm like well I can't, my cards already part way through and she's like ugh and then turns around and has the gall to say to the guy oh, this is what my tax dollars are going to, blah blah blah. This and that and starts saying stuff and I'm just like biting my tongue, trying to be the better person. I'm just like, I'm embarrassed, I wanted to run out of the line and cry and I'm just sitting there and she just like still keeps on and then the lady couldn't find the items and she's like oh, let me just grab the manager to grab the item and this and that, the lady's just like ah, and like going like that and then the manager comes over and she's like helping me and she's like instead of helping her can you like help me at a different register. She just likes starts mumbling again and like mumbling stuff about oh, like shouldn't have a kid if you can't do this, blah blah blah blah.

Then like the guy at the register that does bagging just like was looking at the lady like appalled and I got to the point where I was just like keeping my mouth shut and like tears were streaming down my face. I'm just like standing there like I just wanna get out of here, I just wanna get out of here, it was making me have a massive panic attack. So,

like then I'm shaking and she whispers again to the guy like, look at the way she's shaking, probably on drugs too.

Vera was crying by the time she finished discussing this experience. In this instance, the shaming was done by other customers and the store clerk came to Vera's rescue. Already someone who experiences anxiety, this interaction reinforced any negative feelings she might have in using SNAP and WIC as well as triggered a panic attack.

Kay indicted witnessing this behavior before:

I haven't personally experienced it, but I did, so one time, because I did, well, I told you before, we won't get EBT now that we have this job, which actually I think now we eat a lot less healthy food, because food is expensive. I was paying cash, but I was behind someone that went through with EBT, and she had a lot of stuff. It looked like she was doing a birthday party. The lady complained about her afterwards. Oh, she just came through and bought cakes and junk food and all that stuff. Must be nice. I can't get that for my kid. I'm like, but obviously she's doing a birthday party. She probably would rather have that to have food, but she doesn't have money for a birthday party. So she's using her food money to make her kid have a nice birthday party. So I'm like, people probably have said stuff about me before, but I don't know. This lady didn't say it to me personally. She didn't know how I felt. I was paying cash, so she just assumed maybe I would agree with her or something, because I wasn't using any type of assistance. But I mean people probably have said things about me before.

None of the men in the study specifically mentioned stigma as a concern; however, stigma has been cited as one of the main reasons students underutilize food assistance programs in college (Henry, 2017; Purdam, et al., 2016). Males may have experienced stigma, but perhaps were not comfortable enough to admit feeling



stigmatized. Brother Chris mentioned a reluctance to ask for help for anything and directly attributed it to his gender:

I've always felt uncomfortable asking people for help. Students, teachers, friends, families that know me, I'm a typical guy. I'm a typical man.

John considered signing up for the pantry and went as far as visiting the pantry and receiving the registration form. He never completed the registration or returned to the pantry. He also never completed his registration for the VISIONS program. While he did not mention stigma, he was vocal about the romance of the starving artist's persona to justify past food insecurity:

We were very poor musicians, spending every dollar we made on our rent, so there was a period of time when a bag of potatoes was the food for the entire apartment and it was potatoes every day. It's a little different just because it's definitely more grungy and gross as a musician, whereas, a student, you're keeping clean, you at least have access to a basic financial support because you need that for your books and your supplies.

This is similar to the myth and romance of the starving college student surviving on Ramen Noodles. When introduced to this myth, John did not feel it equated with his experience as a starving musician and failed to see the parallels. The stereotype of college students surviving on Ramen is well documented, however it often serves to dismiss real issues of hunger on college campuses. In examining the "Ramen noodle" myth, Henry (2017), found it was this stereotype of a normalized hunger experience that led many parents to not contribute financially to students' food security. A recent study of 17 food insecure college students, found students were reluctant to visit the campus food

pantry as they did not feel they deserved help as lacking food was a common college experience (Mukigi, et al., 2018). Another study indicated it was lack of awareness that kept students from utilizing a campus party, reporting as low as 4% awareness of campus resources for hunger (Hughes, et al., 2011).

Outside of the college environment, many of the female participants mentioned experiencing stigma. Vera talked about wanting to be able to create memories with her child and being judged in the grocery store for using food stamps to buy cake mix:

I have a three year old and I'm watching all these moms get to bake and do fun things with their kid and I can't do that because society sees if I'm doing that then I clearly don't need help. But like rather it's just like okay, maybe I want memories with my kid.

Her experience is similar to the one Kay witnessed a mother buying birthday cake utilizing SNAP.

Those with experience at off campus pantries felt a lack of dignity in not being able to pick their own food or in the feeling they should be grateful for anything they get. This was not participants' experience at the MCC food pantry where they felt less judged than at community pantries. Vera mentioned being judged based on her appearance (not looking the part or looking too much the part):

I used to get like trashed by a few kids in school like oh, you don't have clothes, there's her clothes like that but you have an iPhone. Yeah, people get gifts. Or people would be like oh, you go to a food pantry or get food stamps but like look at you, you had your nails done. You know we're all human too, we deserve to do things that make us feel good about ourselves. It would be one thing if I like spent a thousand dollars and got like diamond accents or whatever but like it's 15 bucks like and it helps.

Like some girl made a comment cuz I had just been saying oh, I don't know how I'm gonna afford this and she made a comment and started laughing and she's like has fashion color in her hair but doesn't know how to afford this. I'm like, at the time I had my hair done like a different way and it's like, yeah in salon that's crazy expensive but guess what, I went to hair school, so I did it for 10 bucks.

Discussing stigma while utilizing food stamps or a food pantry was very emotional for both Vera and Rosie. Kay was concerned with feelings of stigma based on unhealthy food choices she was forced to make for her family. The stories about stigma when shopping were only shared by women; however, there could be a bias as women are more likely to do the grocery shopping (Jilcott, et al., 2009).

Linda, the oldest in the study and someone who experienced life-long generational poverty, expressed no stigma or shame in utilizing resources for food insecurity on and off campus. Students were more comfortable and confident in seeking resources the older they were and the more they had experience in navigating food insecurity and other challenges. This was more prevalent than a gender difference.

Brother Chris became more comfortable with age. He spoke of his younger self:

I'll give you the example of a reality check that I had many years ago. I was starting a new employment, and through casual conversation about two, three weeks into the job, I said, "Whew, I've been working so hard I haven't eaten nothing." And my supervisor looks up and says, "Chris, you haven't eaten?" I said, "No, I haven't eaten in a while because I've been busy, you know, I'm doing school, I'm doing church, I'm doing this." My supervisor says, "Chris. Go home. Make some groceries, eat some food, and come back to work." And here we go. This is everything wrapped up in one. What do I do? I go home, I get the food, I come back and I eat. But I never come back to work. So this is like a Wednesday. So the whole week goes through. And I'm never really thinking about it much.

Monday morning comes. I show up at work. And it's one of those times when you know, I'm quiet. Everything drops. It's time to face the music, you know what I mean? It's time to really face the music. And my supervisor says, "Chris, why didn't you come back?" And I said, "You know, I just felt like you didn't want me around. I felt like you wanted to fire me. I felt like asking me to leave and going to eat was just another word for 'Get out and don't come back.'" "This reality check worked out in an amazing way. My supervisor said, "Chris, we care about you. You cannot work while you're hungry, you see? We want you to be strong and healthy to work for us."

In addition to being a client of the campus food pantry, Brother Chris was also an intern at the pantry. He explained his philosophy on making others feel safe and reducing stigma:

A lot of people, a lot of people might have the same needs, but do not approach benefits in the same way. So you have some people who are very excited to come, you have some people who are a little bit depressed to come, you have some people who are a little bit reserved to come. Some people who are laid back that come. But, what I like to employ is comfort and communication. So, when you have a bubbly person or you have a smiling face, when you have someone that is going to invite them in and not just stare at them as they shop, I use that word, I use those adjectives, I use those action words, you know. Don't worry, come in, take a look and browse, you get 20 free items, shop until you drop. Enjoy. Now we want to give it more of a shopping experience than it is a pantry aid type of experience.

Stigma was not new for two participants as they had already experienced the stigma of addiction.

### **Addiction**

Two participants in this study disclosed being in recovery for drug or alcohol addiction. Addiction and recovery as an indicator of college student food insecurity is not

mentioned in the literature and would be a good topic for further research. There are few studies linking food insecurity and addiction in the general population. One study, conducted in Israel, explored how social workers could treat food insecurity among drug addicts (Kaufman, et al., 2005). Brother Chris, in speaking about his career goals, explained his experience with addiction:

My future career plans is to get a home, a residence, bring in those that are addicts or homeless, that are in need of support, and to show them that they can indeed recover, get back into society, that they're not thrown away, that their test will be their testimony. And I believe in my heart that each and every person that I help will go on to help somebody else.

Brother Chris also explained his past addictions and how they led him to be homeless and food insecure:

I was totally insecure. Food insecurity, but I was on the streets. It was one beer can after another. It was one funny cigarette after another. And, I ended up having some real health challenges. I ended up coming across something that didn't agree with me. And this was 1996. And from that point in 96 until 2008, I was what they call self-medicating. I would use these drugs as downers. I would use them as depressants.

To be very, very, very candid, I didn't change my life until my mother passed away right in front of me. The house we lived in for 20 years, we lost. That's when I broke away. I was so far off, I was so down, that I went in (to rehab), I wasn't brought in, I volunteered myself to go in. I said, "I can't help it. I can't stop." And later on I found out the word was called addiction. I had never heard of that word.

Brother Chris endured bouts of homelessness over a 12-year period of addiction, but as of the time of the second interview he was clean for the past 11 years. Regardless, he still periodically struggled with food insecurity due to limited employment

opportunities hence his decision to go back to school and earn a degree to improve his job prospects. Linda was asked to elaborate on how her struggles with addiction may have impacted her food security, but she declined to comment.

### **Low-Income Resource Spaces**

Several students mentioned the VISIONS office as a safe space on campus. VISIONS is a TRIO program servicing first generation, low-income students. John qualified, but never completed the registration. Linda, Emrys and Vera all indicated VISIONS was a safe space. The lack of a multicultural center on campus made VISIONS not just a safe space for first generation, low-income students, it also served as a space for students of color who were first generation or low-income. Linda's only photo was of the VISIONS office:

Linda: That's the VISIONS office. I like going in there.

Interviewer: Yeah, you mentioned VISIONS during our interview. What is it about this space that makes you feel safe?

Linda: The people, I had an issue with someone and the director said if he starts on me, he'll kick him out.

Linda indicated feeling protected in VISIONS and often utilized the computers in the VISIONS office to do homework. Vera mentioned VISIONS as the first place she went if she had a problem:

I generally go to VISIONS I thankfully haven't had too many problems. Most of my problems have been with learning the ways of how things are done that I never had to do the first time around like how to schedule because they just pretty much picked mine for me the first time around.

When asked about a positive experience he had in seeking resources on campus, Emrys stated:

(VISIONS) helps a lot too, with the printing. And they're very supportive. And luckily, I know the teachers send out four-week assessments. So, if you know you did something wrong, and if you see (staff) hunting you down, run in the other direction.

The VISIONS office provided a space where students were not expected to disclose low-income status as this was already known. Interestingly, no one mentioned the food pantry as a safe space because low-income status had already been revealed. Yet both offices provide services and resources for low-income students. Next, I examine participants' experience with common adaptive behaviors of food insecure college students.

### **Adaptive Behaviors**

#### **Campus Food Banks**

Half of the study participants did not utilize the campus food pantry. Rosie and Red took courses primarily on the satellite campus and were unaware of the pantry, until their first interviews. Rosie eventually registered but had not taken any items by the time of her second interview. Red indicated she was “secure enough” and did not want to take resources from other students who may need it more. This is a common response from students, even if they are food insecure. John chose not to submit a campus pantry registration form. Kay registered and never utilized the pantry but explained that she runs the food pantry for the church where her husband is a pastor and has access to food through that pantry.

Rosie explained why she did not utilize the campus food pantry, yet lets her father-in-law provide food for them from a community pantry:

I've hesitated on the (college) food pantry. My father-in-law goes to the food pantry a lot, and he'll get me stuff. So he's my go-to babysitter. So when he comes to babysit, he'll bring stuff from the food pantry.

I feel like if I can go get a coffee at Dunkin Donuts, I shouldn't be taking food from the food pantry that someone else probably needs more than me. That's usually how I feel. Like I have a few other options. I can ask family. I can ... I don't want to take from a resource that other people probably need more than me.

Rosie expressed a sentiment similar to Red's, in not wanting to take food as someone else might be more in need. Brother Chris indicated he often heard this when encouraging other students to sign up for the pantry. While reluctant to utilize a pantry, many students readily change their eating habits to combat food insecurity (Goldrick-Rab, 2016).

### **Eating Habits**

Several studies indicate students alter their eating habits such as eating less or buying cheap and unhealthy food as a result of being food insecure (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Freudenberg, et al., 2011; Glik & Martinez, 2017; Goldrick-Rab, 2016; McArthur et al., 2017; Nugent, 2011; Shive & Morris, 2006; Silva et al., 2017). Students in this study were no exception. All but one of the participants mentioned making due with less expensive and often unhealthy food as it was more affordable.

Kay experienced episodic food insecurity since leaving the military and starting a family. Since her husband took a new job as pastor of a local church they were ineligible for SNAP benefits. Kay mentioned her frustration in trying to provide healthy meals for her family while on a budget:



I buy a lot of hamburger that's on manager's special, so it's previously frozen hamburger, and have pasta. Or you can buy potatoes that are on manager's special because, instead of \$3, they're \$2 or whatever. So you eat a lot of potatoes and carbs and box foods. Instead of when we had EBT, I would get the girls strawberries and apples and all kinds of fruit. Because we had WIC too, but now she's five so, now we eat bananas because they're 49 cents, not that bananas aren't good for you. But there's a lot more chips and stuff like that as snacks, because you can get two packs of chips for \$4, or you can get one carton of strawberries for \$4. So I'm going to buy two bags of chips, because that's going to last me for three days.

Budgeting and planning for meals is a common practice among food secure individuals. Brother Chris learned to plan meals as a budgeting strategy to keep himself from spending money on items that were not “necessary” such as snack items:

As mom taught me so many great things, to answer your question as what I do now is I shop in a practical manner. When I go to the grocery store, I'm shopping breakfast, lunch, and dinner.. I'm not shopping you know, thanksgiving dinner every week or every month, you know what I mean. And to be honest with you, being food insecure as a young child and not being able to eat on a regular, regular basis, even today I don't eat on a regular, regular basis. A lot of times I would cook 3, 4 times a month, once a week. But now, I'm trying to take better care of myself. And, I'm cooking breakfast, I'm having me a little apple or orange, my cup of coffee, of course. And my yogurt. So I've been over the years, and over time, just tweaking my repertoire. Like I said, I go into the grocery store, 30, 40 dollars and then I'm done shopping. This is breakfast, lunch, dinner.

Interviewer: So you're planning it out ahead of time?

Brother Chris: Yeah, planning it out. But being food insecure as a child, I still don't eat very, very much.

Linda spoke of skipping meals so her children could eat:

Interviewer: Do you ever have trouble accessing enough food for you and your son?

Linda: Sometimes, yeah.

Interviewer: What do you usually do when that happens?

Linda: Don't eat.

Interviewer: So, do you ever skip meals to make sure he can eat?

Linda: I did it with my girls, too. I've gone without food for a week.

The adaptive behavior of skipping meals was prevalent among participants. All but one participant mentioned having skipped meals in the past due to lack of food.

Brother Chris acknowledged the adverse impact of food insecurity and skipping meals as a college student:

It's hard enough to focus in class, listen to a professor, take notes, prepare to do homework, participate in class, but then to have a hungry, growling stomach on top of it is kind of distracting.

In this section I highlighted participant experience with known risk factors for food insecurity such as disability, addiction, living arrangements, marital and parental status, veteran status, income, financial aid and the rising costs of college and gender. In addition, participants echoed many of the adaptive behaviors associated with food insecurity previously mentioned in the literature including eating and shopping habits. Next, I examine findings related to safe spaces on campus to disclose food insecurity.

## Safe Spaces

Attributes of safe spaces identified by participants include; being physically comfortable or as one participant put it, having the “comforts of home” such as comfortable chairs and a feeling of coziness; dignity; and understanding/compassion. Conversely, students explained what made a space feel unsafe. People inhabiting a space can be safe, but they can also be unsafe and make a safe space unsafe. This appears to be the most important component of an unsafe space and was voiced by all participants. Unsafe people were defined by participants as unwelcoming, judgmental, un-empathetic, unkind, and lacking compassion.

The literature supports the importance of safe people as previous research on safe spaces for students indicates individuals free from judgement and actively cultivating a welcoming environment are conducive to the construction of safe spaces (Newlin, 2016). Conversely, unsafe people exhibiting judgement can make any space unwelcoming (Newlin, 2016). Vera experienced this phenomenon with a food pantry student staff member:

It feels like most of the semester has been kind of hectic between like class and like personal life, and... I recently came about with an issue with one of the girls at (campus pantry) so it's kind of made me be cautious of when I go there. Thankfully, I've become friends with them (the other volunteers), so I can kind of just like, text and be like, "Oh, is she in there?" But I was told she's not in there anymore, so...

Interviewer: So, do you want to talk about what happened? You don't have to.

Vera: She slept with my boyfriend.

Students as staff can often be challenged with confidentiality, but overall seemed supportive and relatable to the students participating in the study with the exception of the example above. The literature on peer mentoring is clear about challenges and rewards (Crisp, et al., 2017) and is reminiscent of the challenge experienced in creating LGBT Safe Zones where the primary concern is training an individual to be safe around a stigmatized topic. As indicated previously, Emrys and Linda specifically spoke of safe spaces as inhabited by safe people in offices such as disability services, counseling services, and VISIONS.

### **Specific Spaces**

Overcrowded and noisy spaces on campus were where Vera felt most safe because she could remain anonymous in a crowd yet could also seek assistance if she felt she was on the verge of a panic attack. She submitted photographs of two consistently busy places on campus (although the business was not captured on film at the time); the Student Center and the South Cafeteria. Emrys had the exact opposite need and sought out quiet places on campus when he felt his anxiety increasing. He took photographs of counseling services, disability services, CCLCE and VISIONS. Although he did not take a photograph of the campus food pantry, he indicated he saw it as an extension of CCLCE and that picture should 'count for both'. Emrys explained it was the people in those spaces, not the physical spaces themselves, which made him feel safe.

Emrys spoke of both the disabilities office and the college counselor's office specifically as resources where he could go when he was experiencing everything from anxiety to suicidal ideation. Suicidal ideation is common for low-income students experiencing financial stress (Eisenberg, et al., 2007). He felt safe in both locations

because they had the resources to help him get through his day. Emrys did not strongly identify as disabled, but the places he found most safe were those providing accommodations and other resources for his disabilities:

So that area right there and then, I didn't think to get ... there are so many things I didn't think to get a picture of. But (coordinator) is a good one, being disability and sometimes she is more, probably more understanding 'cause of how ... like (college therapist) sometimes your thoughts and everything where you have that, sometimes I know they all go hand in hand sometimes your disability when you have thoughts like Bipolar or I don't want to say the word but sometimes when you have the suicidal thoughts.

## **Identity**

I was curious if participants viewed their food insecurity and socio-economic level as identities. There was no indication of food insecurity or low-income as identities held by participants, yet participants did identify with resources available for low-income/first-generation college students through membership in the VISIONS program. The VISIONS program office was mentioned by several participants as a safe space on campus.

As mentioned earlier, when asked about identity, there appears to be no profound difference relating to gender identity and need for safe spaces to disclose food insecurity; all participants expressed this need. Perhaps gender did not play a part in comfort or safety because food is not a gendered experience. Safety may be more of a concern around a gendered experience such as sexual assault or harassment. This leads to the question, is gender identity only activated in certain domains? This is examined in the discussion chapter.

## Summary of Findings

There was no major difference in where men and women go to seek resources for food insecurity. All, save one participant was comfortable at least with the idea of using the college food pantry and community food pantries. Female students expressed stigma and shame in using SNAP benefits, but this was not mentioned by males. All participants spoke of friends and family as potential resources.

Safe and unsafe spaces were a part of students' experience with food insecurity for both male and female students. All participants indicated the need for safe spaces to be free from judgement and free from physical and psychological harm. Gender identity impacted how participants viewed safe spaces as women spoke of physical attributes in a space making it safe unsafe and males did not. Students did not seek safe spaces nor feel safe in spaces due to identity; rather, they felt safe in spaces where they were given the resources they needed (veteran services, VISIONS, disability services, counseling services, etc.). Even when a space was closely associated with an identity such as VISIONS (low-income) or veteran services, students did not perceive those spaces as identity based. All students identified the food pantry as a resource for food insecurity, regardless of gender and regardless of their willingness to utilize it. Students also identified VISIONS, disability services and veteran services as places where they may feel comfortable asking for resources for food insecurity because they already felt comfortable in those spaces.

Is there a gendered response to how society views food insecurity? Possibly but this study did not indicate a gendered response associated with food insecurity. Rather it showed there is a gendered response around feelings of safety. For the men, gender did

not play a part in their experience of food insecurity perhaps because food is not a gendered experience. For women, an emphasis was placed on location, lighting and people as things that can make a space feel safe or unsafe. For men, the emphasis was only on the people in that space.

Finally, two unexpected findings were discovered. The first is that men did not discuss stigma and shame when grocery shopping and utilizing SNAP benefits, although several women had examples to share. It is unclear if the men did not experience stigma or shame, did not remember experiencing stigma or shame, did not internalize experiences of stigma or shame, or simply chose not to speak about them in the interview. The second unexpected finding is that low-income students acquire cultural capital from their families to aid in navigating food insecurity. We know high-income students obtain cultural capital from families and use this capital to succeed in college, low-income students learning key survival skills from families is something to be further explored.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter presented findings relating to potential risk factors and adaptive behaviors for food insecurity, data pertaining to student perceptions of safe spaces, stigma as it relates to food insecurity and safe space and finally, discussions on identity and its relation to food insecurity. In the next chapter, I elaborate on this data and discuss findings in relation to the literature and implications for practice.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **DISCUSSION**

#### **Introduction**

Food insecurity among community college students has been well documented and this study sought to better understand the experiences of food insecure students as it relates to concepts of safety and identity. This chapter discusses the findings shared in the previous chapter as well as implications for practice in the field of higher education.

#### **Summary of Findings**

Findings indicate safe and unsafe spaces are a part of a student's experience of food insecurity, regardless of gender. Safety was important in disclosing food insecurity and in seeking resources for food insecurity for all students interviewed. Race, LGBT status and other identities yielded no difference in need for safety, as all indicated it was highly important. Safety was important for students when seeking resources such as counseling services, disability services and veteran services as well. Conversely, students did not mention the need for safe spaces for tutoring, health services or financial aid but this does not mean they were not safe spaces. Participants did not perceive spaces such as disability services, veteran services, or VISIONS as identity based, but resource based, much as they viewed the campus food pantry. It is important to acknowledge the campus food pantry was seen as a resource and not associated with a food insecure or low-income identity.

Research on safe spaces is more commonly conducted on resource based spaces, but is not always framed as such (see the creation of women's centers Kasper, 2004; Marine, 2011; Wies, 2011), multicultural centers (Newlin, 2016; Patton, 2006a; Patton,



2006b), veteran services (Baker & Leonard, 2017; Dillard & Yu, 2016), Hillel and Christian ministry centers (Cherry, et al., 2003; Schmalzbauer, 2007, 2013), and safe spaces for Muslim students (Ali & Bagheri, 2009; Nasir & Al-Amin, 2006). Perhaps to ensure students are utilizing these resources they should be presented as both identity spaces and resource spaces. Notably absent from the research are studies on low-income spaces and food based resource spaces. In student affairs work and research, we often organize around concepts of identity. However the students in this study did not see their experiences as framed by their identities. There is a danger in organizing our institutions around identities if students do not view their identities as salient when trying to locate resources on campus.

Another interesting finding is that low-income students indicated being more comfortable seeking resources and disclosing food insecurity if they experienced life-long poverty and interactions with social services resulting in the need to self-advocate. Students with children indicated being more comfortable seeking resources and advocating on behalf of their children. This was specifically stated by one participant and implied by others.

When asked about identity, there appears to be no profound difference relating to gender identity and the need for safe spaces to disclose food insecurity; all participants expressed that need. Perhaps gender did not play a part in comfort or safety because food is not a gendered experience. Safety may be more of a concern for a gendered experience such as sexual assault or harassment; leading to the question, is gender identity only activated in certain domains? Gender identity is always present, but it may be more salient in certain domains and certainly around ideas of safety. Recent research on this

topic focuses on transgender and non-binary identity and safety (Drabble, et al., 2019; Fiani & Han, 2019; Hasenbush, et al., 2019). Gender is a salient identity when safety is challenged based on that gender such as in cases of stalking (Logan & Walker, 2019); and fear of sexual harassment or violence (Coffey & Cahill, 2019; Linder & Lacy, 2019). But food insecurity did not influence gender saliency as food insecurity was not seen as a gendered experience by the participants in this study.

When asked to submit photographs of safe spaces on campus and then to describe those photos, there was no discernable difference between the composition and content of neither the photos nor the narratives participants weaved around the photos based on identity. As only one male submitted photos, I was unable to draw any conclusions based on gender differences in what was captured and the narratives constructed around the photos. Emrys, the only male who submitted photos, took photos specifically of spaces that were safe because of the people in those spaces (VISIONS, disability services, CCLCE, counseling services, etc.). They are not included in chapter four because they are not representative of his interpretation of those spaces. The photographs showed empty offices, but Emrys specifically spoke of the people in those offices making them safe.

There were several terms or phrases participants used which could be considered gendered, for example Red mentioned the “comforts of home”. While she was the only participant to use this specific phrase the sentiment was expressed by Rosie in terms of “coziness” and Linda mentioned the Student Center was a place to sit and watch television as the couches were “comfortable”. All three took the term comfort in a very literal and physical sense in their descriptions of safe spaces on campus. Rosie and Red

also mentioned things such as proximity to the main office and campus police as well as good lighting as indicators of safe spaces on the satellite campus. Male participants answered questions of comfortability and safety in abstract terms. Previous research has indicated, “ women's socialization, as well as their experiences of harassment and objectification, construct girlhood and womanhood as fearful states whereby most women are routinely vigilant, consciously or unconsciously ” (Lewis, et al., 2015). This explains female participants focus on physical aspects of safety.

All participants mentioned safe people as an indicator of a safe space. A safe person was defined by participants as someone who is welcoming, non-judgmental, empathetic, kind, compassionate and encouraging. This correlates to best practices in the creation of safe spaces. “Safe spaces are characterized both by the physical location and by the community that gathers there..... their meaning is contingent on the individuals who use the space” (Byron, 2007, pg.120). Safe people were defined as well trained, non-judgmental, kind, relatable, and trustworthy. Emrys mentioned various offices where he felt safe on campus specifically because of the people in those offices. He gave specific examples including the Coordinator of Disability Services, the college mental health counselor and the college nurse. He also mentioned safe offices where many individuals had gained his trust over the years such as the CCLCE that runs the food pantry and the VISIONS office. Emrys described both as places that “feel like a sanctuary”. He discussed visiting both CCLCE and counseling services when he was having panic attacks, as he knew he could calm himself in those spaces.

Interestingly, no students took pictures of the food pantry. Vera expressly talked about safe people as key to a sense of safety in the pantry despite those people not being

represented in her photos. The college has worked to normalize the utilization of the food pantry as a service of the college and several participants acknowledged this. Given the context of the request to take the photos, it was surprising no one took a photo of the food pantry. Finally several participants mentioned locations in high traffic areas made them feel safer because more people were present. Rosie, Vera and Red related safe spaces to physical safety and this was a gendered response. Women's fear of crime and physical safety is documented and is often explained in terms of women's fear of sexual assault and sexual harassment (Mellgren & Ivert, 2019; Yates & Ceccato, 2019). Vera referenced her need to be in noisy populated areas to feel safe from her own internal anxieties which often caused panic attacks as well as safety in numbers.

Diversity in race and LGBT status yielded no differences in what participants considered safe and unsafe; however, only one participant identified themselves as LGBT. Three students identified as Hispanic and one student identified as African American. Two of the three Hispanic students were females who spoke of experiencing stigma when grocery shopping or utilizing SNAP benefits. The White women only mentioned witnessing others have a negative experience with SNAP at the grocery store. Perhaps race and gender compounded the stigma placed on women utilizing SNAP.

Students in this study with life-long economic concerns seemed more equipped to deal with food insecurity and seemed more secure in asking for resources. As previously mentioned, Brother Chris indicated he learned from his mother how to shop (making a list, planning meals), budget and prepare low-cost and nutritious food options. Linda spoke about generational poverty in her family and mentioned going without food for up to a week in order to feed her children. She is now watching her daughter do the same

thing. Linda's daughter, also on disability social security, has three children she struggles to feed. Linda expressed frustration at her lack of ability to help feed her five grandchildren and cited a college education as one way to break that cycle of generational poverty.

When asked what campus resources they identify as "safe spaces" to navigate the issues associated with food insecurity, participants named places where they already established relationships with someone such as the campus food pantry, VISIONS, disability services, veteran services and health services. Interestingly, these spaces are identity based (low-income, first generation, disability, and veteran). Kay said veteran services was a place where she could get free coffee and just hang out, as well as receive her veteran benefits. The VISIONS office suite was spoken of by several participants as a place to use a computer, to utilize tutoring and academic advising and a place where people working in that space made them feel safe.

Being low-income and first generation are common characteristics of community college students (Blagg, et al, 2017) and an identity that is pervasive on campus. With  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the MCC population defined as first-generation, low-income or both, one could assume there would be little stigma around utilizing a food pantry. However for some participants such as John and Rosie, a hesitancy was there to utilize the resources available for food insecurity. Participants may hold an identity of being low-income, but food insecurity is not part of their multiple and intersecting identities.

### **Implications for Practice**

While community colleges are more affordable options for many students, students in this study mentioned other associated costs as being prohibitive, such as food,

housing, books, lab supplies, health insurance and transportation. Having the option of a food pantry on campus helped defer food costs and those dollars could be directed elsewhere. Providing food pantries on campus, in addition to other resources for low-income students, aids in their success. This study indicates the need for safe people who are well trained to destigmatize food insecurity as volunteer staff in the pantry. The physical location and “comforts” in the pantry are important as well.

## **Discussion**

### **Low-Income Capital**

Lower-income families rely on cultural capital to navigate their economic challenges and pass this capital on to their children (Beagan, et al., 2017; Henry, 2017). This was prevalent in the data, yet not something that is often discussed in literature around college student food insecurity. Classism characterizes low-income students as somehow deficient (Bletsas, & Michell, 2014) and should not be used as a lens to examine food insecurity or low-income identity. Viewing food insecurity for low-income students from a deficit perspective does not consider the low-income cultural capital they bring to campus. It was this capital that allowed many students to alter their eating and shopping habits and be comfortable utilizing a food pantry.

### **Safety and Identity**

Little to no gender differences existed pertaining to willingness to utilize the campus food pantry or to disclose food insecurity. However, there were differences in how participants spoke of and interpreted their own feelings of safety. Women in this study were more likely to discuss physical comforts such as office location, lighting and furniture. None of the males mentioned physical comforts as a marker of safety. Emrys

was concerned with people in a space and their ability to make it feel safe for him, whereas Brother Chris focused on how he could make the campus food pantry a safe space for others when he said, “Don't worry, come in, take a look and browse, you get 20 free items, shop until you drop, enjoy.”

The women in this study articulated what made spaces safe in terms of physical safety and comfortability. None of the participants seemed to hold their gender as a salient identity in terms of food insecurity even if it did impact how they viewed and discussed safety. Safety may be more of a concern around a gendered experience such as sexual assault or harassment. This leads to the question, is gender identity only activated in certain domains?

Perhaps gender was not a salient identity due to the phenomenon described in the essay *(Un)Covering Normalized Gender and Race Subjectivities in LGBT "Safe Spaces"*. When specifically referencing LGBT Safe Zones as safe spaces, Fox and Ore (2010) state they become complicated when not inclusive of all dimensions of diversity, “space discourse continues to operate within a normalizing gaze of a White, masculinist, middle-class subject, rendering queer subjectivity in a most simplistic and reductive manner and producing an illusionary safety” (p. 631). Therefore, students who are not White middle-class males are often asked to forgo other aspects of their identities when entering a safe space, rendering those identities invisible. This would explain why gender was not a salient identity in relation to food insecurity and why it was not activated in terms of safety within this domain.

There were few discernible differences in how men and women discussed safety or food insecurity, with minor exceptions. Only women discussed experiencing or

witnessing shame and stigma when using food stamps at the grocery store and women also equated physical comfort and the “comforts of home “with feelings of safety. Men did not mention feeling safe closer to the campus police or main office and feeling safe in well-lit areas of campus, but this was important for women. The images students captured and the explanations they gave for taking those photos were not notably gendered. In fact, participants rarely mentioned gender relating to food insecurity or safety. However, when asked they were able to make the connection and elaborate on their own ideas of what constitutes a safe space and why safe spaces are important when discussing food insecurity. The female participants took a very literal view of safety as opposed to thinking of safety in terms of climate or culture on campus. The only commonality between what men and women thought was important in a safe space as safe people.

Safe people was a theme for most participants. When asked if safe and unsafe spaces are a part of a student’s experience of food insecurity and if so, does identity impact feelings of safety in certain spaces, students never directly answered the question. The discussed concepts of safe and unsafe spaces in an open ended way with specific references to safe people and the qualities of a safe person. This led me to the conclusion that “safe people” make a space safe.

A safe person was defined by participants as someone who is welcoming, non-judgmental, empathetic, kind, compassionate and encouraging. Safe people volunteering in the food pantry as well as safe people who are seen as resources for other concerns (first-generation/low-income, disability, etc.) were mentioned frequently. Conversely, unsafe people were specifically mentioned by Vera as a reason to not utilize the food



pantry. Overall feelings of safety were important in disclosing and seeking resources for food insecurity for all students interviewed.

Comfort was equated with safety for three of the four female participants. Much of the literature on the connection between comfort and safety concerns classroom discourse and is framed as negative because creating a comfortable classroom atmosphere based on content can inhibit students ability to learn, to explore alternative viewpoints and to confront feelings of unease with a subject matter (Arao & Clemens, 2013; Byron, 2017; Pereira, 2012). The conflict surrounding trigger warnings and the use of alternative pedagogy to avoid discomfort is a long, on-going and beyond the scope of this study. For female participants feelings of comfort came from real physical comforts. Little else is mentioned in the literature about equating comfort (physical or psychological) with safety in college education. Finally, race and LGBT status yielded no difference in need for safety or how safety was viewed in terms of food insecurity.

One area that has received much attention in the literature around identity and safe space is LGBT Safe Zones, as discussed in chapter three. Research on LGBT Safe Zones indicated individuals could be trained to create a safe space for vulnerable identities. Could a Safe Zone style program work to create safe spaces for food-insecure students? LGBT Safe Zone training can consist of: “panels of LGBT students, staff, and employees; referral guidelines for counseling and harassment reporting; role plays; information about identity development; resources available on and off the campus; and general LGBT information” (Poynter & Tubbs, 2008, pg. 125). Training exists for MCC food pantry volunteers, but mainly consists of how to conduct inventory, checking out patrons and referrals for other services. Very little emphasis is on creating a safe

environment or avoiding stigma.

Low-income is the identity most associated with food insecurity. While students did identify with being low-income, food insecurity was seen as an outcome of their lower income status. Social class is framed as social identity (Evans, et al., 2009) and as such can be studied like any other identity formation. Social class has components including a social class of origin, that for all but one participant was low-income and a current social class that again for all but one participant was low-income (Barrett, 2012). For participants, being a student did not result in a change of social class. There is limited literature on social class identity in college and few road maps to follow regarding the development of that identity.

Being food-insecure was not an identity, rather it was described as something to navigate and overcome. Half of the participants lived in poverty their entire lives. This is not surprising as at most community colleges, nearly  $\frac{2}{3}$  of students at MCC are low-income and or first-generation students. Being low-income at a community college may not feel like an identity as opposed to being a low-income and or first generation at a four-year institution.

### **Safety and Resources**

Safety was important for students when seeking certain types of resources such as disability services and veteran services. Conversely, students did not mention the need for safe spaces for tutoring, health services or financial aid. Perhaps these services have become normalized services on a college campus and; therefore, they do not need to be identified as safe. The concept of stigma appears regularly as a potential concern of tutoring services, however; there has yet to be evidence that students who receive tutoring

services are stigmatized (Ciscell, et al., 2016). Health services are not mentioned in the literature as a stigmatized service, although students often fear stigma associated with mental health services (Gaddis, et al., 2018; Hirsch, et al., 2019; Kosyluk, et al., 2016 ).

When asked what campus resources they identify as safe spaces in which to navigate issues associated with their food insecurity, participants named places where they had already established relationships such as VISIONS, disability services, veteran services and health services. Interestingly, most of these spaces are identity based (low-income, first generation, disability, and veteran). However, participants did not perceive them as identity based, but resource based. This may be the most important finding and could inform how we frame resource spaces, identity space and safe spaces in the future.

### **Implications for Practice at MCC**

This study provided insights into student perceptions of safe spaces and perceptions of how students view identity in relation to resources. As the staff member overseeing the campus pantry, I am in the unique position to implement changes based on the findings discussed above. Based on research into LGBT Safe Zone training, it has been demonstrated that people have the potential to be trained around a specific topic to be safe and welcoming. Current training focuses on the basics of running the pantry such as food check out, registration and inventory. Training for all campus pantry personnel and volunteers at MCC will now include anti-stigma and anti-judgment training. Included in this will be an understanding of cyclical and rural poverty as well as an appreciation for the capital and strengths low-income students bring to the campus. The physical layout of the pantry will be changed to include some “comforts of home” such as a comfortable armchair for intake, a microwave and an area where clients can leave their

items to be picked up at the end of the day versus carrying them around campus all day.

Students in this study felt safe in spaces where they received resources such as the VISIONS program and veterans services. They did not see these spaces as identity based but as resource based. This has implications for marketing any resource based program at MCC. While the campus pantry has always focused on resources versus identity, other spaces on campus such as disability or counseling services may benefit from marketing their services differently. Insights from this study will be shared with those departments at MCC.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

The limited scope of this study yields many recommendations for future research. Increasing the overall number of participants is important as well as the diversity of participants. A similar study conducted at a more diverse institution, perhaps in an urban setting, would yield more participants and more racial diversity among participants. More inclusion of the LGBT population, non-cisgender women, and more male identifying participants is recommended as well as participation of men with children. In this study, all of them women, except one, had children while none of them men were parents. A deeper exploration of the cultural capital low-income students bring to college and how they utilize this capital to succeed is another area for further research. Finally, a deeper look into the success of resource based spaces on campus could yield a deeper understanding of the characteristics leading to their successes and failures.

### **Conclusion**

The overarching question for this study was, how do female community college students navigate food insecurity? To answer this question, the following sub-questions

were posed: are safe and unsafe spaces part of a student's experience of food insecurity and if so does identity impact feelings of safety in certain spaces?; what campus resources do food insecure community college women identify as "safe spaces" in which to navigate the issues associated with their food insecurity?; and why do food insecure community college female students perceive these spaces as safe?.

This study found that safe spaces play an important role for all students in seeking all resources on campus, not just resources for food insecurity. The most important characteristic of a safe space is safe people. A safe person was defined by participants as someone who is welcoming, non-judgmental, empathetic, kind, compassionate and encouraging. Training around creating a safe space for food insecure students, similar to LGBT Safe Zone training could be helpful to ensure volunteers and student staff of the campus pantry exhibit the characteristics mentioned above. Women indicated characteristics of safety not mentioned by men such as lighting, proximity to a central office or campus police as well as "comforts of home" such as comfortable furniture and coziness.

Conditions such as pre-existing or childhood poverty and experience with stigmatized identities, such as addiction, impacted how students viewed their food insecurity and their level of comfort seeking resources. Participants accessed resources for identities such as low-income and first-generation college students or resources for mental health and veteran status with ease, but they did not identify those spaces as identity based, rather resource based. This may be the most important finding and could inform how we frame resource spaces, identity space and safe spaces in the future.

## **APPENDIX A**

### **RECRUITMENT EMAILS**

Hi (Name will be populated):

Did you know that the college just opened a food pantry for students in need? Food for Thought: Campus Pantry is located in room 192 (across from Life Long Learning) on the main campus and is open Monday, - Thursday, 10-2pm. You can also drop by the Brewer Center (room 152) at off hours to access the pantry. There is no income requirement, just be registered for at least one class during the semester.

I also wanted to let you know about an opportunity to talk about your experience with resources at MWCC. I am trying to understand what resources students need to be successful on campus. I am currently a Ph.D. candidate and this is my dissertation study. The study will take place starting in the fall here at MWCC and will consist of two in-person interviews (approx. 60 min. each) about three months apart. In addition, you will be asked to take photos of some of the spaces you utilize on campus (you can use your phone or I will provide a camera). The entire process is confidential (pseudonyms will be used and the college name will be changed). You will be compensated for your time in the form of a \$10 Barnes and Noble gift card per interview.

I am particularly interested in students who qualify for Pell grants or other forms of financial aid. If you are interested in sharing your experiences and helping future students gain the resources they need, I would love to hear from you! Please click on the link below to fill out a quick pre-screening survey. Everyone who fills out the pre-screening survey will be entered to win a \$10 Barnes and Noble Gift Card.

If you chose not to participate in the study, no problem. I hope you visit the Food for Thought: Campus Pantry, regardless!

Thanks, Shelley

### **Food Pantry Users**

Hi (Name will be populated):

Thank you for your interest in participating in a study around your experience with resources at MWCC. I am trying to understand what resources students need to be successful on campus. I am currently a Ph.D. candidate and this is my dissertation study. As we discussed when you visited the food pantry, the study will take place starting in the fall here at MWCC and will consist of two in-person interviews (approx. 60 min. each) about three months apart. In addition, you will be asked to take photos of some of the spaces you utilize on campus (you can use your phone or I will provide a camera). The entire process is confidential (pseudonyms will be used and the college name will be

changed). You will be compensated for your time in the form of a \$10 Barnes and Noble gift card per interview.

I am particularly interested in students who qualify for Pell grants or other forms of financial aid. If you are interested in sharing your experiences and helping future students gain the resources they need, I would love to hear from you! Please click on the link below to fill out a quick pre-screening survey. Everyone who fills out the pre-screening survey will be entered to win a \$10 Barnes and Noble Gift Card.

If you chose not to participate in the study, no problem. I hope you continue to visit the Food for Thought: Campus Pantry, regardless!

Thanks, Shelley

### **Not Selected**

Thank you for your interest in participating in a research study on food insecurity and resources on campus. I appreciate the time you took in filling out the survey. However, at this time, I am unable to offer you a spot in the current study. Should a spot open up, I will certainly be in touch via email.

This in no way impacts your ability to receive services through Food for Thought: Campus Pantry. If you have yet to visit the pantry, please come by room 192. If you are a current pantry user, I hope you continue to utilize the pantry.

Best of luck this semester,

Shelley

### **Selected**

Thank you for your interest in participating in a research study on campus resources. You have been chosen to participate! In selecting participants, I looked for a diverse group of students to share their unique experiences here at the college. The resources we will focus on are particular to food insecure students.

The next step is for us to schedule our first interview. The interview should take about 60 min, but we will schedule for 90 just in case. There are several times and dates available to choose from. Please click on this link (insert Doodle link) to schedule our first meeting. As you will see, there are a variety of times/dates and locations for your convenience.

You will receive a confirmation email from me within 48 hours of selecting your time slot. The email will contain directions to the location, confirmation of time and date as well as my contact information should you need to reschedule for any reason.

You do not need to prepare anything for our first meeting. I look forward to meeting with you soon!

Thanks again for your willingness to participate!

Shelley



**APPENDIX B**  
**RECRUITMENT SURVEY**

[http://survey.constantcontact.com/survey/a07ef20smwujcqe6yhb/start?TEST\\_ONLY\\_RESPONSES\\_NOT\\_SAVED=t](http://survey.constantcontact.com/survey/a07ef20smwujcqe6yhb/start?TEST_ONLY_RESPONSES_NOT_SAVED=t)

**Demographics Information Required Question(s)**

Thank you for your interest in participating in a research project examining food insecurity in community college students. Below is a series of demographic questions.

There are no right or wrong answers. I am hoping to select a diverse pool of 10-12 participants. If you have any questions or concerns about this survey, please contact me at [menichol@educ.umass.edu](mailto:menichol@educ.umass.edu).

Thank you!

1. Name:
2. Preferred E-mail Address:
3. Major:
4. Gender – select all that apply:

☐ Man

☐ Transgender

☐ Gender Queer

☐ Not Listed - Please specify below

5. Race - select all that apply.

- ☐ African-American
- ☐ Asian/Pacific Islander
- ☐ Caucasian
- ☐ Latinx
- ☐ Native American
- ☐ Not Listed - Please specify below

Comment:

6. What year were you born?

7. How many children live with you? Please list year(s) of birth.

8. What are your sources of income? Check all that apply.

- ☐ Employment (Yours or spouses)
- ☐ Financial Aid
- ☐ Veteran Benefits (Yours or spouses)
- ☐ Disability Benefits
- ☐ Unemployment Benefits
- ☐ Other Benefits (please specify below)

- ☐ No  
income

Comment:

9. Select all the apply

- ☐ Utilize MWCC Food for Thought: Campus  
Pantry
- ☐ Utilize other food  
pantries
- ☐ Receive SNAP Benefits (Food  
Stamps)
- ☐ Utilize fuel  
assistance
- ☐ Qualify for any of the above, but do not  
utilize
- ☐ Oth  
er

Comment:

Thank you for your interest in this study. Should you be chosen to participate, I will reach out via email.

## **APPENDIX C**

### **INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS**

#### **First Interview**

Materials Needed: Audio recorder, signed consent form, timer. Approximate time (60 min total).

#### **Welcome**

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. In addition to overseeing the MWCC Food for Thought: Campus Pantry, I am pursuing a doctorate in education at UMASS Amherst. For my dissertation, I am interested in focusing on female students who are (or have recently been) food insecure. The information provided will help guide the future services offered by the Food for Thought: Campus Pantry at MWCC in addition to serving as my dissertation.

Your participation in this study (or lack of participation) will in no way impact resources available to you as a student through the Food for Thought: Campus Pantry. You will still be eligible to receive assistance for food insecurity and other services regardless of your participation.

I want our conversation to flow naturally and as such have developed a small set of ground rules for the discussion:

- Everything discussed here today is confidential and we both agree not to repeat what is said or heard outside the bounds of this interview
- To protect your privacy, I will not be using your real name, nor will I be using the name of the college in my research

- At any time during our conversation feel free to abstain from participating if you do not feel comfortable speaking. Similarly, if you need to leave the room at any time, you are free to do so

- Please feel free to interrupt me at any time during our conversation if you have any questions or would like something clarified

- You can choose to stop participating in the interview at any time and for any reason

- Finally, keep in mind that I want to know your own personal thoughts and feelings on the topic. If at any time you wish to share something you have overheard from others, please preface your comments appropriately.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Do you mind if I audio record our conversation? You can ask me to stop recording at any time during the conversation. By recording our conversation, it will help me remember the details of our conversation. Again, identifiable information, including your name, will not be used in my dissertation.

### **Begin Taping**

### **Guiding Questions**

Thank you again for agreeing to be a part of this study. I am interested in the valuable insights you can offer regarding how students find resources here at MWCC. To start, could you briefly introduce yourself, your name, your major and anything else you would like people to know about you (family size, age, future career plans, etc.)

1. We are going to begin by talking about where you are seeking resources or help on campus. Where do you go on campus for help when you are having a problem?  
How did you hear about this particular resource(s), places or people?
2. Can you tell me about a positive experience you had in seeking resources of help on campus? How about a negative time?
3. Do you ever feel uncomfortable asking for help? Why or why not?
4. Did anyone make you feel uncomfortable asking for help on campus? How?
5. Now I would like to specifically ask about resources for food insecurity and then move specifically to asking about resources for food insecurity. As food insecurity is often defined in different ways, I would like to start by clarifying the definition of food insecurity: “Limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways.” What on campus resources if any, have you used relating to food insecurity? What was the experience like?
6. Previous research indicates that students are often uncomfortable using resources for food insecurity (such as a food pantry). Have you ever hesitated to seek out resources? If so, why?
7. Have you used the MWCC food pantry? Why or why not?
8. What are some things an office or food pantry could do to make you comfortable?
9. Do you feel safe in all your identities when visiting the food pantry (race, gender, LGBT status, age, ability, etc.)?
10. Is there a place on campus where you feel most safe? If so, what about this place makes you feel safe?

11. How do you know if a space is safe on campus?
12. Have you ever felt unsafe on campus? Why?
13. Who on campus makes you feel safe?
14. Finally, I'd like to know if you feel you have anything in common (other than seeking out resources for food insecurity) with other students who need resources? Is there a common identity you might share?
15. Is there anything that I did not ask that you would like to discuss?
16. If you could choose one thing we discussed today, what is the single most important thing I should take away from our discussion?

### **Closing**

Thank you so much for participating in this conversation. I want to remind you that everything said here today is confidential. The information you have provided will inform the direction of the Food for Thought: Campus Pantry. In addition, you have provided invaluable insights into the experience of food insecure female community college students. I truly appreciate your honesty, candor and willingness to be vulnerable when discussing this difficult topic.

I would love the opportunity to chat with you again about this topic in a few months. I will be in touch via email unless there is another method you prefer. When we are done, you will be provided with the opportunity to look at your interview transcripts and I welcome your feedback on the entire process. Between now and then next time we meet, please feel free to be in touch should you think of anything else you would like to share.

Again, thank you!

## **Second Interview**

Materials Needed: Audio recorder, approximate time (30 min total).

### **Welcome**

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me again.

Do you mind if I audio record our conversation? You can ask me to stop recording at any time during the conversation. By recording our conversation, it will help me remember the details of our conversation. Again, identifiable information, including your name, will not be used in my dissertation.

### **Begin Taping**

### **Guiding Questions**

I want to start by looking at the pictures you sent me. Thank you for taking the photos. Then we will move on and talk about some themes I noticed in the first-round interview transcripts. Does that work for you?

1. Can you describe this picture?
2. Why did you take this photo?
3. Why did you identify this as a safe space?
4. What about this space is safe?
5. Next, I would like to talk about some of the themes that I noticed during the last interviews. When I say this word or phrase, can you tell me what you think of?
6. What does location mean to you?
7. What do you think of when I say negative feelings?
8. What about relationships?
9. How about strategies to be food secure?



10. Many students indicated disability or illness being a reason for food insecurity?

Do you have anything you would like to share about this?

11. What about resources for food?

12. Finally, safety. What does safety mean to you?

### **Closing**

Thank you so much for meeting with me again. This is really the end of our formal time together, but if you think of anything you would like to share with me, please do not hesitate to be in touch.

## **APPENDIX D**

### **CONSENT FORMS**

Consent Form for Participation in a Research Study  
University of Massachusetts Amherst

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**Researcher(s):** Michelle “Shelley” Errington Nicholson, Doctoral Candidate; Kathryn McDermott, Faculty Advisor, Dissertation Chair

**Title:** Locating Safe Spaces for Food Insecure Female Community College Students

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#### **1. WHAT IS THIS FORM?**

This form is called a Consent Form. It will give you information about the study so you can make an informed decision about participation in this research.

This consent form will give you the information you will need to understand why this study is being done and why you are being invited to participate. It will also describe what you will need to do to participate and any known risks, inconveniences or discomforts that you may have while participating. We encourage you to take some time to think this over and ask questions now and at any other time. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and you will be given a copy for your records.

#### **2. WHO IS ELIGIBLE TO PARTICIPATE?**

This study is open to currently enrolled Mount Wachusett Community College students. Subjects must be at least 18 years old to participate.

#### **3. WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?**

The purpose of this study is to explore how students at a small rural community college navigate food insecurity. Specifically, the problem to be addressed is how community college students identify and utilize safe spaces on campus to disclose food insecurity.

#### **4. WHERE WILL THE STUDY TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?**

This study will be conducted at Mount Wachusett Community College and consist of two sets of 60 minute interviews over the period of six months. Following the second interview, participants may be contacted to review interview transcripts to answer clarifying questions.

## **5. WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO?**

There are three parts to the research study. The first part was a pre-screening survey which you have already completed. The next phase of the study entails an interview where you will be asked to answer questions pertaining to resources on campus and food insecurity. The final phase is providing photographs of spaces on campus (if you wish to take any) and answering follow up questions during a second interview session. During both interview sessions you may skip any question you feel uncomfortable in answering. You may also decline to take photos between the two interviews.

## **6. WHAT ARE MY BENEFITS OF BEING IN THIS STUDY?**

You may not directly benefit from this research; however, we hope that your participation in the study may aid the researcher in understanding how resources are obtained for food insecure students to inform future practice.

## **7. WHAT ARE MY RISKS OF BEING IN THIS STUDY?**

We believe there are no known risks associated with this research study; however, a possible inconvenience may be the time it takes to complete the study or discomfort in discussing the topic.

## **8. HOW WILL MY PERSONAL INFORMATION BE PROTECTED?**

The following procedures will be used to protect the confidentiality of your study records including audio files, interview transcripts and photos. The researchers will keep all study records, including any codes to your data, in a locked file cabinet or online storage through Box. Research records will be labeled with a code. A master key that links names and codes will be maintained in a separate and secure location. The master key and audiotapes will be destroyed (3) years after the close of the study. All electronic files (*include all the types of electronic files that are used, such as databases, spreadsheets, etc.*) containing identifiable information will be password protected. Any computer hosting such files will also have password protection to prevent access by unauthorized users. Only the members of the research staff will have access to the passwords. At the conclusion of this study, the researchers may publish their findings. Information will be presented in summary format and you will not be identified in any publications or presentations.

## **9. WILL I RECEIVE ANY PAYMENT FOR TAKING PART IN THE STUDY?**

Students who complete the screening survey were entered into a raffle for a \$10 gift card to Barnes and Noble, the college bookstore. Students will receive a \$10 gift card to Barnes and Noble per round of completed interviews. Students who submit photos between rounds one and two of interviews will receive a gift card for a free beverage in

the college cafeteria. For those fully completing the study, they will receive \$20 in gift cards to the college bookstore and a free beverage in the college cafeteria. Students are eligible for partial compensation based on completion of each stage.

### **10. WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?**

Take as long as you like before you make a decision. I am happy to answer any question you have about this study. If you have further questions about this project or if you have a research-related problem, you may contact the researcher, Shelley Errington Nicholson, [menichol@educ.umass.edu](mailto:menichol@educ.umass.edu) or 978-353-9131. If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research subject, you may contact the University of Massachusetts Amherst Human Research Protection Office (HRPO) at (413) 545-3428 or [humansubjects@ora.umass.edu](mailto:humansubjects@ora.umass.edu).

### **11. CAN I STOP BEING IN THE STUDY?**

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. If you agree to be in the study, but later change your mind, you may drop out at any time. There are no penalties or consequences of any kind if you decide that you do not want to participate.

You will be notified of all significant new findings between interview number one and interview number two that may affect your willingness to continue.

### **12. WHAT IF I AM INJURED?**

The University of Massachusetts does not have a program for compensating subjects for injury or complications related to human subjects research, but the study personnel will assist you in getting treatment.

### **13. SUBJECT STATEMENT OF VOLUNTARY CONSENT**

When signing this form I am agreeing to voluntarily enter this study. I have had a chance to read this consent form, and it was explained to me in a language which I use and understand. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have received satisfactory answers. I understand that I can withdraw at any time. A copy of this signed Informed Consent Form has been given to me.

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Participant Signature:

---

Print Name:

---

Date:

By signing below I indicate that the participant has read and, to the best of my knowledge, understands the details contained in this document and has been given a copy.

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Signature of Person  
Obtaining Consent

---

Print Name:

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Date:

## APPENDIX E

### IRB LETTERS



**University of Massachusetts: Amherst**  
108 Research Administration Bldg.  
70 Butterfield Terrace  
Amherst, MA 01003-9242

**Research Compliance  
Human Research Protection Office (HRPO)**  
Telephone: (413) 545-3428  
FAX: (413) 577-1728

#### Certification of Human Subjects Approval

**Date:** September 13, 2018  
**To:** Michelle Nicholson, Educ Policy, Research & Admin  
**Other Investigator:** Kathryn McDermott, Educ Policy, Research & Admin  
**From:** Lynette Leidy Stevent, Chair, UMASS IRB

Protocol Title: Locating Safe Spoons for Food Insecure Female Community College Students  
Protocol ID: 2018-4768  
Review Type: EXPEDITED - NEW  
Paragraph ID: 7  
Approval Date: 09/13/2018  
Expiration Date: 09/12/2019  
OGCA #:

This study has been reviewed and approved by the University of Massachusetts Amherst IRB, Federal Wide Assurance # 00005909. Approval is granted with the understanding that investigator(s) are responsible for:

**Revisions** - All changes to the study (e.g. protocol, recruitment materials, consent form, additional key personnel), must be submitted for approval in e-protocol before instituting the changes. New personnel must have completed CITI training.

**Renewals** - All renewals need to be submitted at least 2 weeks prior to the expiration date listed on this approval letter.

**Final Reports** - Notify the IRB when your study is complete by submitting a Final Report Form in e-protocol.

**Consent forms** - A copy of the approved consent form (with the IRB stamp) must be used for each participant (Please note: Online consent forms will not be stamped). Investigators must retain copies of signed consent forms for six (6) years after close of the grant, or three (3) years if unfunded.

Use only IRB-approved study materials (e.g., questionnaires, letters, advertisements, flyers, scripts, etc.) in your research.

**Unanticipated problems involving risks to participants or others** - All such events must be reported in e-protocol as soon as possible, but no later than five (5) working days.

Please contact the Human Research Protection Office if you have any further questions. Best wishes for a successful project.



Thursday, September 27, 2018

Dear Shelley,

Your research project entitled *Locating Safe Spaces for Food Insecure Female Community College Students* has been reviewed and approved by the Mount Wachusett Community College Institutional Review Board (IRB). Please note that this approval does not constitute sponsorship or an agreement to act in a gatekeeper role for the project. The researcher is solely responsible for contacting research participants.

As Principal Investigator for the project, you are responsible for the following:

1. Submission in writing of any and all changes (e.g., protocol, recruitment methods, consent forms, etc.) to the IRB for review and approval prior to initiating the change(s).
2. Submission in writing of any and all unexpected event(s) that occur during the course of this research.
3. Submission in writing of any and all unanticipated problems involving risk to subjects or others.
4. Submission of a continuation, if needed, prior to the IRB expiration date below.
5. Submission of a final report upon completion of this project.

The IRB can and will terminate projects that are not in compliance with these requirements.

The period covered by this approval is from October 2018 through May 2019.

Please contact me if you have any questions about the terms of this approval or about the required follow-up. I may be reached by phone at 978-630-9350 or by email at [locchipinti@mwcc.mass.edu](mailto:locchipinti@mwcc.mass.edu).

Sincerely,

Laurie Occhipinti  
MWCC IRB chair

**University of Massachusetts Amherst Research Compliance** 108 Research Administration Bldg.

**Human Research Protection Office (HRPO)** 70 Butterfield Terrace

Telephone: (413) 545-3428 Amherst, MA 01003-9242

FAX: (413) 577-1728

### **Certification of Human Subjects Approval**

**Date:** September 13, 2018 **To:**

Michelle Nicholson, Educ Policy, Research & Admin

**Other Investigator:** Kathryn McDermott, Educ Policy, Research & Admin **From:** Lynnette Leidy Sievert, Chair, UMASS IRB

Protocol Title: Locating Safe Spaces for Food Insecure Female Community College Students Protocol ID: 2018-4768 Review

Type: EXPEDITED - NEW Paragraph ID: 7 Approval Date: 09/13/2018 Expiration Date: 09/12/2019 OGCA #:

This study has been reviewed and approved by the University of Massachusetts Amherst IRB, Federal Wide Assurance # 00003909. Approval is granted with the understanding that investigator(s) are responsible for:

Revisions - All changes to the study (e.g. protocol, recruitment materials, consent form, additional key personnel), must be submitted for approval in e-protocol before instituting the changes. New personnel must have completed CITI training.

Renewals - All renewals need to be submitted at least 2 weeks prior to the expiration date listed on this approval letter.

Final Reports - Notify the IRB when your study is complete by submitting a Final Report Form in e-protocol.

Consent forms - A copy of the approved consent form (with the IRB stamp) must be used for each participant (Please note:

Online consent forms will not be stamped). Investigators must retain copies of signed consent forms for six (6) years after close of the grant, or three (3) years if unfunded.

Use only IRB-approved study materials (e.g., questionnaires, letters, advertisements, flyers, scripts, etc.) in your research.

Unanticipated problems involving risks to participants or others - All such events must be reported in e-protocol as soon as possible, but no later than five (5) working days.

Please contact the Human Research Protection Office if you have any further questions. Best wishes for a successful project.



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